

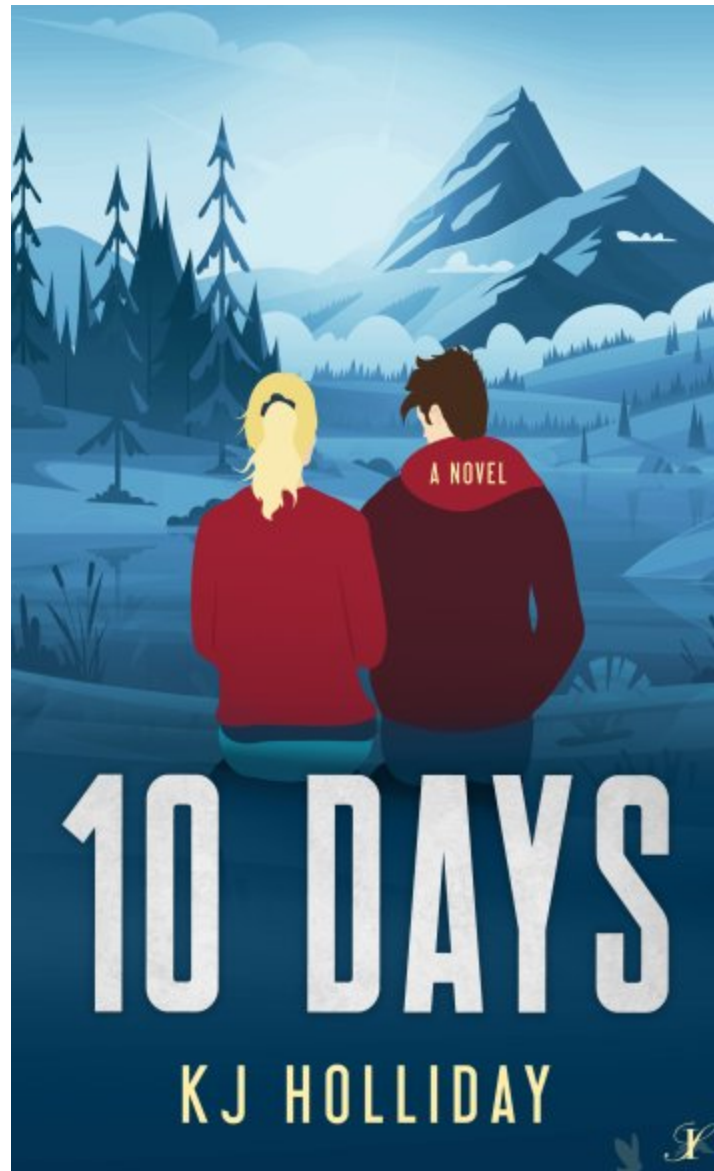


A NOVEL

# 10 DAYS

KJ HOLLIDAY





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# 10 Days



## KJ Holliday

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10 Days

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# DEDICATION

## **To my Launch Team:**

Sarah

Cat

Katie

Jessi

Cassie

Courtney

Christa DeRaven

Kate

Makayla Smith

Meghan

Cyd Bowes

Liane

Lizzie

Miss Leah Book Blog

Daphne S-Vieira

Courtney Allen

Heather

Mary

Anna





# Chapter 1

He couldn't believe he had agreed to this.

It was official. Alex had gone completely out of his mind.

*"You need to experience the outdoors in order to write a compelling main character who is a survivalist,"* they said.

*"We went camping every summer as kids and know everything there is to know about the outdoors,"* they said.

*"It will be fun,"* they said.

Yeah right. Yeah. Fucking. Right.

The drive to wherever this adventure was going to take place was taking an unnatural amount of time. Couldn't they put nature somewhere convenient? Like next to a diner?

If he didn't know Luke any better, he might think that the soulless ginger bastard was taking him up into the mountains to kill him. It's not like threats had not been made when certain people, *\*cough\** Alex *\*cough\**, beat other certain people, *\*cough\** Luke *\*cough\**, at *Gears of War* for the millionth time. In Alex's defense, Luke had the tactical skills of a fucking Neanderthal.

That's why he was pretty sure this survivalist thing was going to be a cakewalk. He, after all, had deductive reasoning on his side. So much so, he was able to deduce by the looks of the road they'd been winding on for the better part of two hours, they were most likely about to come to the junction of bum fuck and "You've got a purdy mouth."

It was an ungodly hour, in an ungodly uncomfortable back seat, with an ungodly lack of coffee.

He slouched in the seat of the station wagon, his beanie pulled down so far it was nearly covering his eyes. He could feel the heaviness of his lids as he leaned against the ancient paneled door. If he was really going to have to be subjected to being in a car for a decade, it was only fair he

was allowed a nap. The last time he saw this side of six a.m. ... well, he wasn't sure he'd ever seen this side of it.

Six a.m.s were only seen when he'd found himself in a particularly productive groove at the keyboard. Sometimes writing was like pressing razor blades into his skin, and try and try as he might, he couldn't put enough pressure down to break. Other times, it was like turning on a faucet—the words poured from his fingertips at a pace no human could possibly keep up with. He, of all people, would never allow himself to willingly wake up at this time. No respectable writer would.

A familiar heavenly scent filled his nostrils and he cracked a single eye open. He was met with a rainbow of forest green, specifically the long thick lashes framing expressive meadow eyes. Attached to it was a girl with blonde hair pulled tightly into a ponytail at the top of her head, and a cupid's bow mouth that seemed to be stained permanently red.

Penny Foster was twisted around in the passenger seat of the car, extending a cup of coffee toward him. Steam emitted from the metal container, and he had the urge both to cry for joy and propose marriage.

Wait, where did the coffee even come from? Was this woman a witch?

As he let his gaze take in the rest of her—grey sweater, faded jeans, light rain jacket, incredible body—he thought she just might be. He pulled himself up, extending his hand to wrap around the proffered cup. His fingers brushed hers, but he didn't let her warm skin stop him.

"Are you carrying around a coffee machine under your jacket that you didn't tell me about?" he grumbled, bringing the rim of the cup to his mouth and taking a swig. His eyes closed as the luminous taste of bean permeated his taste buds.

*Dear god, thank you. Thank you for bestowing coffee upon this earth and delivering it to me in this moment. I will*

*be forever indebted to you. Forever your slave.*

Dear god, as an intellectual, please also realize he was completely full of shit.

He reopened his eyes to find Penny looking at him in amusement. She arched one golden eyebrow before lifting a large metal canister into his line of sight. A thermos. Bless this woman. He shouldn't have been surprised at her forethought; Penny Foster was anything but underprepared.

The first time Alex Jones had met her was a month after he started at NYU. Luke and he had been placed together in the dorms, and despite the fact that Luke, with his easy personality and his boyish good looks, was the complete opposite of Alex in every single way, they had, up until that point, not tried to kill each other. They weren't exactly friends yet, but they weren't exactly not friends either.

Alex respected that Luke was working his football scholarship in order to study music. In the four weeks they had cohabitated together, he'd learned four things:

1. Luke fucking sucked at video games.
2. Apparently his dad owned a construction company.
3. Picking up his laundry was an unknown activity.
4. And the guy got more pussy than the rest of the dorm combined.

He wasn't kidding either. In a month Alex had seen more women walk through their dorm room than the revolving door at Macy's.

Alex had to hand it to him, Luke had mad game; however, it was kind of hard to focus on his work when a headboard was constantly smacking against the composite of the dorm room wall.

It's not that he didn't like women. He loved women. He'd met plenty of girls over the years he found to be pretty, even beautiful. He liked the softness of them, the ease of their smiles, and the tranquility of inner peace he'd never

been able to master. Women were creatures he didn't think he'd ever truly understand. Sure, he'd dated, he'd more than dated, but he wasn't interested in a woman solely for what was underneath her shirt. Finding a woman whose best feature was located inside of her skull and not stuffed into a push-up bra? That deemed to be a little harder sell. At least it was for him.

The day he'd met the blonde in question, he had unlocked his dorm room just like any other, except for one thing: he had been pissed off. His Lit professor had given him a bad mark on a paper he'd spent an insane amount of time editing, and the prospect of having such a bad grade so early in his very first year was enough to send him into a downward spiral. He had ripped his messenger bag over his shoulder, tossed his keys—wherever the hell they landed—and was about to fall face-first onto his bed when he caught sight of a figure.

She was sitting cross-legged on Luke's suspiciously made bed.

"Jesus Christ, not again," he had muttered.

If the girl had heard him, she hadn't let his words, or his clearly irritated tone, faze her. "You must be Alexander," she chirped happily, extending her hand and giving him a genuinely pleased smile. "Luke's told me about you. I'm Penny."

He eyed her hand as if it had the potential to give him Ebola. They stood like that, awkwardly for a minute, then two, before he reached out and shook her hand lightly.

He had to say, she wasn't like the usual girls Luke brought home. The first indication was she was wearing clothes. A simple long-sleeved V-neck shirt, jeans, and Ked sneakers so white they could have been brand new. Her hair was pulled up out of her face, and her face, well, she was actually quite pretty.

Pretty in the "I'm not trying too hard because who gives a fuck what you think" kind of way, and he liked that *He really*

*liked that.*

It was a shame she was there for Luke, he thought.

Of course, until Luke opened the door and introduced him to Penny Foster, childhood next-door neighbor and resident best friend. Seven years had passed since then, and though Penny and his path had crossed more times than he could count since that fateful day in October, he wouldn't call the two of them close. They had a singular thing in common, and that was they were both friends with Luke. They weren't best friends by any means, but they weren't acquaintances either. They were more ... friend-adjacent.

Definition aside, it didn't stop Alex from knowing things about her. They shared a best friend for fuck's sake, and over the course of knowing someone for seven years, it was easy to pick up certain bits of knowledge about one's character.

*Things Alexander Jonathon Jones knew about Penelope Foster:*

- 1. She was fucking brilliant. Like next-level Bobby Fisher-esque brilliant.*

She'd graduated with honors from Columbia, a year early, and was one of the youngest resident journalists on salary at the New York Times. Her work was good. The kind of good that won Pulitzers. As someone who also wrote (and was published, thank you very much), it was high praise.

- 1. She was a goddamn saint.*

It wasn't just that she willingly put up with Luke for her entire life. She put up with Alex when they crossed paths, and her family—which, according to Luke, was the equivalent of watching a train crash into a shit show. Between the drama associated with her sister's teenage pregnancy (with a man whose family was the Fosters

equivalent of the Montagues), the hate-crime-committing grandfather, the obsessive Stepford monstrosity masquerading as her mother, and the illegitimate brother that came out of the woodwork when they were all teenagers, it was a miracle Penny was able to put a smile on her face. She did more than just smile. She was unfailingly kind to everyone she met. She was perky and optimistic and just *so* fucking likable. If someone were to put Alexander Jones on a spectrum next to Penny Foster, he was sure they would be on polar and complete opposite ends of it.

*1. She was prepared for everything.*

It was not only that she could manifest coffee out of a tear in the fabric of the space-time continuum. No, once when Luke had forgotten to bring a toothbrush on a weekend trip to the Hamptons, she had extras. She was legitimately carrying extra brand new toothbrushes in her suitcase, as if that was something normal people did all the time. Her over-preparedness didn't stop at material essentials either; she was basically the human version of a vending machine. The woman baked like there was no tomorrow, and she didn't even have the audacity to be bad at it. Her cookies were delightful. Her muffins? To die for. Don't even get him started on her meatloaf. She was a culinary savant, and with his appetite, it was the biggest compliment he could possibly give her.

She always carried food with her, and a testament to number two on his list, she always, and without fail, offered something to him. To his credit, he'd only asked her to marry him three times so far—out of countless delicious and indescribable snacks later, he'd been impressed that was all.

*1. She cared entirely too much for people.*

Enough that even someone as socially inept as him had noticed. Penny wore her heart on her sleeve the same way she wore her brilliant smile on her face. She was a vivid ray of sunshine through the monotonous gloomy clouds of everyday life. She loved helping people. She loved making people feel special.

The thing he noticed both consistently and unbelievably was that the people around her, the people who had been fortunate enough Penny even deigned to look in their direction, took it for granted. Not overtly, not even intentionally (he hoped); it was the little things. She never failed to make sure Luke had groceries in his fridge when she came over. When they'd been in college, she'd come over and pick up their room. Luke went along with a blind eye, as if his laundry was just magically doing itself. Alex had even watched as she, who had been volunteered by her cousin Charlotte to organize a fundraiser, ran herself ragged for weeks without even a thank you. He'd never understood how she put up with it, how the others didn't realize what they were doing. He counted her lucky he wasn't close enough to land underneath the umbrella of people she really cared about. She didn't need to look after another person, let alone him.

*1. She was beautiful. Once he'd gotten to know her a little bit, he found her insanely, completely, indescribably beautiful.*

He'd noticed it when he'd first met her, had lamented she had been there to see Luke back when he'd believed she was there solely to jump between the sheets. It wasn't until later, when he realized she fell under "off-limits sister-status," that he let himself observe her more closely. She had a quiet beauty. The kind that subtly kept you enraptured. She hardly ever wore makeup, and when she

did, it was just enough to enhance her already stunning features.

He understood women weren't objects, and was the first to proffer strongly worded soliloquies on the topic. The real reason to engage in the constructs of the mating ritual called modern-day dating was because of what was inside a woman's mind, not what was on her face—or her body. Her body though ...

Hey, he was human, she was human, and the human part of Alex really, *really* noticed the human part of Penny. He was cognizant, however, of one very important thing. She was millions of miles out of his league.

Okay, he'd published *The Overpass*, a murder mystery novel based off true-life events. Yeah, it had been marginally successful. He was even engaging on this nightmare trip into the boonies in order to meet the impending deadline for the first draft of his next book. Not solely for the integrity of artistic expression, but more because if he wasn't able to finish it within the next two months, his editor would track him down and commit homicide. Straight up ice pick shoved through the nasal cavity.

His editor's words; but Alex was in the midst of an extreme case of writer's block. Hence, the desperate measures into the unforgiving wilderness ... and Penny Foster? With her pretty eyes and her happy heart, well, she wasn't for him.

He wasn't stupid. He knew he wasn't the conventional choice for women. He was broody, preferred his solitude, drank entirely too much coffee, smoked the occasional cigarette, and would rather stay at home with a good book than go out and get "lit." Even without the awkward personality traits that were more than enough to scare off the fairer sex, the tragic protagonist backstory did not help things.

He couldn't decide which was worse, his father being a convict or a gang-leader. Not that he had the opportunity to



choose, as the two were tied together. His convict/gang-leader father didn't quite sell him to women. Neither did his mother and little sister somewhere out there in the witness protection program. Coupled with the ink staining the skin of his arm, all his childhood proved was it didn't matter how far a person ran from their circumstances, fate had a way of finding everyone.

If his father hadn't been arrested the last time, Alex would probably still be running with the Bloodhounds.

He definitely would have ignored the massive manila folder in the mail from NYU informing him he'd gotten a full-ride scholarship. He wouldn't have continued to write. He wouldn't have moved away from Toledo. He wouldn't have met Luke and, well, he guessed Penny by extension. In summation, when it comes to drawing cards, an ace, Alex was not. Other than the things he had gotten for himself, he had nothing to offer any woman.

Let's be perfectly clear, he didn't have a thing for Penny, not in the least, but as an objective fellow (who liked to refer to himself as fellow in a conversation), he could recognize girls like her didn't end up with boys like him. Let's be clear again, because he seemed to have checked his penchant for eloquence at the station wagon door. He was not a boy. He was a man. A man who was going to be spending the next ten days in hillbilly hell for the sake of his art. Did the world see the lengths he was willing to go for his readers? How in the hell did *The Overpass* only reach number eight on the *New York Times* bestseller list?

He was honestly asking.

But it's not like he could call someone to get it changed. Not even his agent, Vivian, who he likened to a brunette juggernaut.

Vivian was probably the scariest woman he'd ever met in his life. Everything about her just screamed imminent danger. If it wasn't for the fact she'd somehow been able to negotiate higher royalty rates than the industry average,

and an astronomical advance for a first novel, he'd probably have steered clear when she offered to represent him. He was ninety percent certain she'd done hard time at one point, and sometimes, when he shuffled his way into her office, she looked as if she was legitimately setting up a hit on someone. If he thought he'd be able to make it out of their partnership alive, he'd consider basing the main character of his next book off her.

He wouldn't; he liked his entrails exactly where they were.

He fished his phone from his pocket, unlocking his screen with a swipe of his thumb. He stared idly at the top corner, immediately focusing on the tiny antenna and the small X next to it. No service. Of course, there was no service. He wouldn't be surprised if there was no electricity or running water out in these parts either.

He hoped that the ten days would go by fast. The likelihood he'd be that lucky? Slim to none.

\*\*\*\*\*

Another forty-five minutes passed before they finally turned onto a gravel road. From there it took another twenty-five minutes up the side of a hill before they pulled up near a lake. From his spot in the back seat he could make out a weathered-looking picnic table. The remains of a fire pit were silhouetted against a beautiful blue lake. The clouds were frothy in the sky, picturesque against the stoic rolling mountains. Tiny pinpricks of black flew from left to right, and he identified the dots as birds. He had to admit, as far as views went, it wasn't half bad.

The slam of the car door snapped him out of the inspection of his surroundings. He grabbed at the door handle and pushed it open, stretching his limbs to step out into the unknown. The air was crisp, and it felt strange as it rattled in his lungs.

“What is that smell?” Alex belabored, eyeing the area around him suspiciously.

Luke had already thrown open the hatch of the station wagon. Penny was suddenly at his side, smacking a large bag into his abdomen. He caught it with an audible *oof*.

“Fresh air,” she said with an amused look on her face. She moved forward, carrying a massive bag toward the picnic table. He looked down at the thick rectangular bag she’d thrust, rather harshly, into his stomach. It was grey with vibrant orange accents and made of a thick canvas with two long handles.

She was trying to tell him something. He just knew it.

“What’s this?”

She spun, taking a few steps backward as she called back to him, “The tent. I figured your first lesson would be figuring out how to set it up.” She gave him what he could only describe as an evil look, one he would never have thought Penny was capable of producing, before spinning back around on those perfectly white shoes and heaving her bag onto the table.

*Note to self: Watch Penny Foster and her witchcraft like a hawk.*

He eyed the bag again. Eh. How hard could it be?

\*\*\*\*\*

Turns out, harder than it looks. First of all, fuck tents.

No one needed a tent anymore. Every one of the middle-class Americans of the twenty-first century, who were all too lazy to be bothered with this bullshit, used RV’s. The only, *only* thing that gave him any level of satisfaction as he looked at the tangled heap in front of him was that slowly but surely RV’s would become more accessible and profit for the dastardly contraptions before him would decrease rapidly and, then, best-case scenario, all tent companies would go out of business. He hoped he got to see the day

when tents were as recognizable and identifiable as floppy disks.

Petition for this to happen. Drafted. Edited. Signed. Published.

A voice filtered in from behind him. "How's it going there, champ?"

He turned to see the figure of the devil herself, leaning casually against a tree, arms crossed over her chest and a violently amused look on her face. How had he once considered Penny angelic? He had clearly been concussed for the past seven years because the woman before him was delighting in his inadequacy, and it irritated the hell out of him.

He was a published author, someone who kept up on current events, an avid reader with an intense passion for historical accuracy. How was he incapable of pitching a tent? The offending item lay flat against the ground. How did it get up? Did they inflate it?

"It's fine," he grumbled, turning back to the mess and trying to calculate what each of the pieces meant and how they fit together.

"It definitely does not look fine." Penny chuckled, her voice grew louder, and within seconds she was sidling up to him, hands shoved into her back pockets and eyebrows raised into her hairline.

He scowled deeper. *Dragon lady*. "This tent is structurally unsound."

She laughed and his stomach flip-flopped despite wanting to tear his own hair out. "You have to lay it flat first. That's the only way you know where the rods go." She ambled forward, waving him toward the pile of tarp that may as well have been a pile of garbage. He moved with her, taking mirroring steps to the opposite edge of the tent. She bent down, grabbing the edge and pulling it taut. He did the same, the canvas stretched and he could make out the tell-tale corners of a rectangle.

Well, Fuck.

She moved to the furthest corner; he followed suit. Together they stretched out the rest of the fabric. Penny walked around the collapsed tent, careful not to step on it, toward the pile of rods attached with plastic. They were a good eight feet away from where the tent had ended up, not because he threw them or anything ...

*Spoiler alert: He definitely threw them.*

All she had to do was lift an eyebrow. His gaze immediately went to the ground, a flush staining his cheeks like a goddamn school girl talking about a teen heartthrob. Yeah, so that's who he was now. A blusher.

With adept hands, she unwound the mass of tangled rods, ignoring the opportunity to berate him senselessly for being an utter asshat. "So, you take the rods and you snap them into place like this." With a rotation of her hands she mindlessly snapped the rods together. He watched in awe as they extended into a long pole. Long enough they bent with their own weight, and in his mind, he quickly put the pieces together—the tabs, the rods, the holders.

*Motherfucker.*

"I'm the dumbest person on the planet."

"You're not dumb," she drawled, handing him the pole and letting him thread it through the first of the tabs for the tent.

Bless this girl. He took back every word comparing her to the devil.

"Could've fooled me," he lamented, moving his way to the other side of the tent, running the rod all the way through.

"Dumb people can't finish the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. You aren't dumb. You're just a different kind of smart."

He looked at her from where he was crouched. Eyes taking into account her soft smile as she closed the few

steps between them and handed him the rest of the tent rods. He took them.

“I’m going to go help Luke look for some firewood. You going to be all right?”

He shot her an unamused look. “I think I got it.”

She turned, heading toward the tree line. He almost didn’t look at her ass when she walked away. Almost.



## Chapter 2

He only stumbled a few more times, but he finally managed to get the tent up. He also staked it to the ground without any help whatsoever. Grizzly Adams move over, Alexander Jones was here.

He was even more impressed he was able to get it done before Luke and Penny had come back from the forest with their arms loaded with wood. His great achievement was seemingly overlooked, because instead of the obvious acclaim he deserved, Luke moved to split some wood for the fire and Penny went to set up their beds in the tent. Alex was ignored, except to eventually be tasked with collecting freshwater from the lake.

It was for a variety of purposes, or so he was told. All he knew was the fifty-five trips up and down the hill, to the lake and back, heaving water, was the modern-day equivalent of torture. By the time the water was retrieved, the wood split, their beds ready, and the food hung in a fucking tree for some reason, it was already five o'clock. Alex was sure that if he didn't get something to eat within the next three minutes, he was going to literally die.

He sprawled on the bench of the picnic table, the fire crackling at his feet as Penny rummaged through a bag next to him.

"Please tell me there is something to eat."

She scoffed, and that alone was enough to tell him food wasn't going to be ready anytime soon. He figured the next course of action was to pout but wasn't sure what good it would do other than make him feel better. Penny watched him with an unamused expression on her face, finally shaking her head, reaching her entire forearm into a bag and manifesting a Ziploc filled with muffins. His eyes caught



sight of the bag from his peripherals. He reached out and snatched them immediately, tearing open the seal, grabbing one, and stuffing it into his mouth.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "You're disgusting."

"I'm *starving*," he said, while he attempted to unhinge his jaw to accommodate the massive bite.

Penny sighed, and he focused in on her. Her eyes met his, and he could tell she was overthinking. She revealed her musings with a wave of her hand. "I don't think I brought enough food."

"With the way Alex eats, you're probably right. We'll probably have to trap something," Luke chimed in from his spot on the opposite side of the picnic table. His friend had a sinister-looking knife in hand, and he'd been working at flicking the edge along a few thin sticks for what seemed like a good ten minutes.

Alex's eyebrows rose. "Like an animal?"

"No, Alex, a fucking person," Luke deadpanned.

*Sarcastic son of a bitch.*

He glowered at the redhead, who rolled his eyes with an amused shake of his head.

"It's easy; we'll show you," Penny assured him before taking out a package of hot dogs from the magical bag of food she'd been dipping into.

Hot dogs. Yes, that would do nicely.

He moved to snatch them off the table, as well, to which Penny caught him by swatting away his hand. "Would you wait?" she admonished.

His lower lip protruded slightly as he watched her move the package out of his reach. "Honestly, I don't think I can."

Luke moved to a half-seated position, extending one of the sticks toward Alex. He took it, but he had no idea what to do with the newly acquired spear.

"I appreciate you, but it's probably not the best idea to arm me." Luke snorted at Alex's comment. Penny shot him

an exasperated look while she wrapped her hand around the stick and pulled it from his grasp. "Hey! That's my weapon!"

"It's to roast the dogs." Once she'd said it, he noticed the packet of hot dogs was blissfully open and she was spearing one on the end of his stick. She pointed the contraption, dog and all, at the fire, then handed the spear back to him. He zealously turned around, stabbing the edge of the stick into the flames.

"Careful, or you're going to light your stick on fire. We didn't soak them first," she warned as she motioned for Luke to hand over the next stick he was preparing.

To be honest? That sounded pretty made up.

*Spoiler alert: It definitely was not made up.*

It took all of four minutes before his stick caught fire. Which resulted in his hot dog residing on a bed of coals. Luke howled and Penny did her best not to smile but couldn't contain the curling at the edges of her mouth.

Charcoal-flavored hot dog? Surprisingly not all that bad.

\*\*\*\*\*

With everything that was required in order to set up a long-term camp. It was amazing people did this for fun. It was exhausting.

By the time nine o'clock rolled around and Alex had listened to Luke muck about with his guitar for the second solid hour, he had never been readier to go to bed. Penny looked on sympathetically. Showing him into the tent and where he would be sleeping.

It wasn't a big tent, mind you. It had said six people could sleep in it on the bag, but he would argue that even three people crowded into it was a little much.

Three heavy pieces of foam, at least six inches thick, were on the ground, side by side, and each one held a corresponding pillow and series of blankets and sleeping bags. He'd borrowed his sleeping bag from Luke's dad, given

he hadn't owned one since he was a homeless teenager. He figured he wouldn't need much else, as it was August and he was hot-blooded by nature. He'd manage for a week. Still, there on the middle cot (the one that was deemed his), sat a small quilt he hadn't brought but was folded neatly beneath his pillow. It was probably Penny's doing, and he made a mental note to thank her for it later.

He'd shoved off his clothes and folded them neatly so Penny didn't feel obligated to do it for him, before hopping his way into his grey sweatpants. The tent was hardly five feet tall, and the action was more than a little awkward. He'd done the entire ordeal bent over to avoid smashing his face into the top of the tent and bringing the entire cursed contraption down around him. The last thing he needed was the ridicule he was sure to receive if he managed to do that on their very first night.

He tunneled his way under the blanket. He didn't think there was ever a time in his life he drifted so easily off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

He didn't wake up when Penny and Luke finally came into the tent and settled in for the night. No. That didn't wake him. He did, however, wake to find himself wrapped around a warm body like a fucking anaconda.

Sometime in the course of the night, he had moved the few feet from the center to where Penny was asleep. His front was pressed against her back, his face buried in her hair, his arm thrown over her waist, and his knees were slotted perfectly behind hers.

She was warm, warm and soft and entirely too comfortable; and when his wits finally came back to him, he realized how utterly he'd messed up.

*Great job, Alex. Well done.*

He prayed she was asleep as he slowly disentangled himself from her. He eased his body back toward where his pillow sat forgotten, little by little, inch by inch. He thought he was almost lucky enough to get away with it when she rolled over. Her hair was wild, and her sleepy eyes were scrunched in a way that was entirely too adorable for her own good.

Well, hell, if he didn't get caught.

He mouthed at her, "Sorry," to which she scrunched her face up even further and buried her head into her pillow.

He took a swift inhalation of breath, willing himself to ignore how warm she was, how good she felt pressed against him. The perfect embodiment of the little spoon. Each place fitting his exactly where it ought to. Of course, her body fit him like a glove. Of course, she did.

He stopped himself for heaving a massive sigh. Instead, he clenched his fists and vowed that he wouldn't be so stupid again. Wouldn't even think about it.

When he woke the next day, at the ungodly hour of six a.m., Penny was wiggling her way out of the circle of his arms.

Well, *fuck*.

\*\*\*\*\*

He woke up again at the respectable time of 9:37. The exact way he enjoyed waking up, on an odd number, when he wanted, with no alarm clock in sight. The light was blinding through the panels of the tent and he seethed at the contraption he was encased in. They couldn't make these things blackout? They just assumed people liked sunshine? And joy?

They were barking up the wrong tree with him.

With sleep-heavy muscles he pulled himself up, pressing the palm of one hand into his eye and rubbing tiredly. When he opened them, he caught sight of the neat bed-clothes

and perfectly organized things where Penny had slept. He groaned as his very unceremonious activities the night before came back to him.

Somewhere in the course of the night, he'd been possessed by some sort of spirit. One that was hellbent on embarrassing the ever-loving shit out of him. Who had died recently that may be haunting him? He was drawing a blank. Honestly, he'd said some not nice things about Bob Dylan in his day, but he was fairly certain Bob Dylan was still alive.

Despite that tragedy, he couldn't think of anyone else in the world who would have had it out for him. So much so they'd expend the effort to hang around and haunt him after their death. It was the only explanation why he acted like a total putz in his sleep. A putz who was apparently magnetically attracted to Penny's body.

Not even just once, mind you. He'd done it twice. When he swore he wouldn't!

She was going to kill him. Straight witch-power melting his brain or, the more likely scenario, withholding breakfast. Honestly, he couldn't decide which of the two were worse.

He blew out a massive gush of breath before turning, grabbing his pair of black jeans and a faded black T-shirt from his half-open bag. He got dressed laying down, choosing not to chance his six feet with the tent again. Knowing the way his luck was going, he'd probably break the thing to the point that even Penny-Martha-Stewart-Bear-Gryllis-Foster couldn't fix it. He awkwardly tugged his pants over his hips, pressing his legs to the ground and pushing his pelvis up to get the fabric over them.

Putting on one's pants should not leave one mildly out of breath. Yet here he was, laying on his back, breaths coming in slight pants, staring up at a hexagon-shaped dome. When he finally managed to get his socks on, then shove his feet into his boots, he felt less awake than he had been. Unzipping the tent, he caught sight of Penny and Luke at the picnic table.

“Morning,” Luke said jovially as Alex slipped onto the bench, bringing his head down onto the worn wood of the table with an audible *thunk*. Luke chuckled, and Alex wondered if burnt hot dog stick or no, he’d be able to stab his friend hard enough to break skin.

Scientifically speaking, that was. Important knowledge for the book (read: unnatural morning people who deserved death).

“Die in hell.”

He heard Penny chuckle from her spot on the other side of the table, and for some reason the hair on his arms stood on end.

He lifted his head, his eyes meeting hers. This was it. This was where Penny outed him and his possessed sleep-cuddling to Luke, who promptly invoked the bro-code, and then sent him to the bottom of the lake wearing concrete shoes. He wouldn’t be surprised if Penny had packed some, she’d packed just about everything else.

Her eyes were dancing with amusement, her lips tugged into a knowing smirk, and her hair was down. It didn’t look brushed but wavy and tousled, as if he’d been running his hands through it when he’d clearly blacked out. He liked that.

*He really liked that.*

In an objective, she was an attractive woman, who he may or may not have spent the night actively snuggling, kind of way.

“Sleep well?” she asked innocently, shifting her body to the right. Once again, she manifested the same metal cup she’d magicked the day before. She passed it to him and he brought it to his lips to find it gloriously full of freshly brewed coffee. He finished the cup before she even had a chance to lower her hand. Her golden eyebrows sat damn near in her hairline as he passed the cup back to her.

He grinned. “Like a baby.”

She rolled her eyes and brought the thermos into view, refilling the cup and pushing it back to him. He took it without thought.

"I'll say. You snore," she mocked lightly. To which, coffee now ingested, brain firing on all cylinders, he had the ability to recognize as an insult.

"Luke snores," he corrected, bracketing his elbows on the table and bringing the rim of the cup to rest against his lower lip.

"You both snore," she said emphatically, scooting her body forward and tipping open the lid of the cooler. A plate wrapped in tin foil emerged a second later and she set it before him, fingering the edge off to reveal scrambled eggs and what looked like bacon.

He took it back. He no longer regretted the snuggling. He'd snuggle her for eternity if she wanted. Did she want the forward for the next book dedicated to her? He'd do that, too. Because this was bacon and eggs worthy of a king, served in a setting he could only describe as squalor.

He dropped the cup to the table and brought the plate closer to him.

Wait a second, he needed a fork. Or did he? Was he desperate enough to use his hands? He ate burgers and fries with his hands, he supposed anything could be a finger-food if he tried hard enough.

Across the table, Penny was watching his internal turmoil with a smile on her face. When his eyes caught hers, she was biting her bottom lip to stop from laughing, the end of a fork pressed between her thumb and forefinger.

The lip thing did truly terrible things to his imagination. It didn't help her lower lip was so fucking plump that he could imagine biting into it would be as fluffy as the eggs he was hellbent on devouring. Coupled with the pink of her cheeks and the mischievousness in her eyes, he'd say Penny was doing her very best to drive him insane.

He shook the thoughts away, reaching toward the fork. She pulled it back and he furrowed his brow.

She may have the upper hand at the moment, with her cuddly softness and ridiculously erotic mouth, but the cardinal rule of a Jones was to never get between one and food. He would declare war if he had to.

"Say thank you," she said, letting her lip loose as she spoke. He was transfixed with it for a second, watching the flesh return from where her teeth had bitten into it. A cherry red stain had bloomed onto her lower lip from the pressure.

He didn't take his eyes off it as he complied with her request. "Thank you."

She passed the fork to him. He finally brought his gaze back to hers just in time to register her smug "You're welcome."

*You're welcome.*

The look on her face held infinite secrets. It wasn't just a "You're welcome for the fork." It was for the snuggling, and not telling about the snuggling, and the coffee, and the breakfast. He wasn't the best at these sorts of things. But he was ninety percent ... eighty percent ... sixty-seven percent ... fairly certain she was flirting with him. A blind person would be able to notice. Well, Luke seemed totally unfazed by the entire thing, so he'd have to say a blind person would notice before Luke did, but they would still notice, and that was ... interesting ...

He figured it would be best not to dwell on it, so his mind scattered for an appropriate topic to discuss, too early in the morning. "So, what do we have planned for today?"

Penny perked up, fumbling for a royal blue notebook while he focused on inhaling his breakfast as quickly as possible. "I think we should start with making shelter first. In the event of someone being lost or living off the grid, they'd need to know how to make a sustainable place to stay. That's probably the most practical place to start."

"Good call," Luke affirmed, nodding in agreement.



Alex dropped his fork to his plate with a clatter. Shelter? They were going to make him build another place to sleep for when their joke of a tent eventually became unusable? Except this time he probably wouldn't have ambiguous directions printed on shoddy material he could blame his inadequacy on.

Penny grinned at him as if she could read his thoughts. With the scowl marring his face, she might very well have been able to.

Scratch that. This wasn't flirting. It was torture.

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Turns out, Luke was the expert in the whole shelter area. Which was surprising. Not to put his friend down or anything, but if he had to choose between Luke or Penny finding them a place to sleep in order to survive, he definitely wouldn't have put his eggs in the Luke basket.

They'd been traipsing through the woods for the better part of an hour now, and he had to say, he was 115 percent certain they were lost.

"Heya, Luke? Where are we right now?" he asked, jogging the few steps ahead to sidle up to the redhead's side. Luke had an intense expression on his face, one that Alex had to admit was pretty impressive. He obviously took this stuff seriously, which was not something Alex had known about his friend.

"We're in the woods," was the redhead's reply.

Alex closed his eyes, pressing the lids together tightly. It was the only thing he could think to do because that answer had caused him physical pain. *Oh, were they, Luke? Is that where they were?*

Remember what he was saying about being impressed? Forget all of that. They literally were all going to die.

"A generic statement if I've ever heard one."

Penny's voice filtered from behind them. "I think what he means is that you need to alter your perception of where you are. This isn't Fourth and Main. There are no gridded streets and GPS directions. No 'World's Best' coffee shop on the corner. We're in the woods, and there are different rules regarding how to get around."

She lifted the compass off her neck, moving forward to place it over his. He had to bend down a little in order to accommodate their height difference. "Shitty coffee or not, I'd welcome one right now," he drawled, rocking his shoulders back and stretching his neck to either side, letting the newly acquired item settle onto his chest.

He caught a whiff of perfume as she took a step away, one he recognized instantly as belonging to her and one he'd smelt countless times over the course of seven years. Most women overdid perfume. He had no idea why most girls were convinced the more they poured on, the more desirable it became. It did the exact opposite thing for him. There were only so many vanillas, coconuts, or musks a person could inhale without going a little batty. And yet, in his entire life, he'd never smelled a perfume like Penny's. She smelled like bluebells.

It was light, airy, and clean smelling. Just barely there. A teasing amount. Enough it would make someone chase after it to try to identify exactly what it was. From personal experience, it took around three years to pinpoint; but he was sure if someone were to bury their face in the juncture of her neck, they'd be able to work it out much sooner. Not that he wanted to do that or anything.

She tapped on the plexiglass of the compass now hanging around his neck. "Our camp is South, we're heading North."

His eyebrows furrowed as he picked up the compass. The arrow inside bobbed as he moved. He spun to the right, watching the compass dip to the white E. Then to the left where it pricked at the W.

He laughed out loud.

This was neater than hell! Why didn't everyone have one of these things? He could get anywhere! Well, anywhere in an exactly straight line in an aforementioned direction.

"Easy there, champ." Luke laughed, motioning for them to move forward. Champ, there was that word again. Penny had called him that yesterday when he was "setting up" the tent. Had they gotten together prior to this trip and coordinated insults? Why wasn't he invited? Alex had plenty of practice mocking himself, he could have given them a wealth of material.

"This is cool. Why doesn't everyone have one of these?" Luke arched a brow at him, shooting him a look that very clearly communicated "Are you kidding me?" Alex recognized it because it was a look he usually sported whenever Luke did something completely ridiculous, like the time he frosted his tips. He had to backtrack to figure out what he'd said. "What?"

Penny chuckled, and he brought his attention to her. She was, after all, the logical one out of their party; he'd defer to her sense to decipher what Luke was teasing him for. "I think they went out of style when the computer was invented."

Oh, yeah, right. Phones. The useless rectangle sitting in his pocket. The one with equal parts no service and no power source. Why was he even still carrying the thing around?

He let his dissatisfaction at being called out settle within him. The compass fell to his chest, as he crossed his arms sourly. "Are we learning anything today? Or are we just walking through the woods? The coolest thing I've learned so far is that these exist." He held up the compass again.

Silence passed between the three of them for a minute before Penny took the lead. "The most important part of building a shelter is location, location, location."

Really? That was the pearl of wisdom she was going to give him? He was trying to live through this endeavor, not

launch his own startup.

“Things that are important. Number one, you find high ground. If it rains you don’t want to be laying in water, so preferably something with a slight slope to it. High ground also offers you the superior position if something were to happen, like you were being tracked. It’s a better view point, gives you the tactical advantage if there is an altercation. All things your character would know.”

THANK YOU. THIS. This is why he came here.

Now if he only had his fucking laptop on him to write this down. Another item he had brought with him but also suffered from a very severe lack of electricity. “Pen! I need a pen!” he said, waving his hands at Penny.

She scoffed, threading her thumbs into the straps of her backpack. “What makes you think I have a pen?”

Was she kidding? He thought the question had an obvious answer. So he voiced the very thought. “Are you kidding?”

She rolled her eyes but pulled off her backpack. He grinned as she manifested a pen and the small navy notebook she’d brought out earlier. He creased the page open, making sharp jarring notes he was certain were indecipherable to anyone but him.

“What else?”

Luke replied, “Ideally you would want to put it as close to a solid structure as possible. Like a tight smattering of trees, a cave, or a rock face. The most important thing you would want to make sure of is that there is only one point of ingress. You don’t want something sneaking up on you in the middle of the night.” Ingress? Look at this guy. Using his words. “There’s a spot right over this ridge here that will work. Great view point, and the trees butt right up to a rock so you’ll be able to use it to make the structure.”

He liked the way that sounded, thought that his character, a retired marine on the run from a group of crooked government officials, would consider logistics of

trees to rocks when setting up shelter. He made several more scratching marks on the notepad, blindly following the figure of Luke as they made their way toward the ridge.

He continued to walk and write, something he should have realized from the get-go was going to be a recipe for disaster. It took him about fourteen steps before he tripped, and because the universe wasn't done humiliating him that day, he did it face-first into Penny.

"Shit, sorry."

"Easy there, Jones. No need to throw yourself at me."

He felt his face heat as he grumbled another apology. He closed the notebook and actually focused on where he was going this time. Luke's massive tree trunk legs were a bit difficult to keep up with, but he had the luck—either good or bad, subject currently under debate—of having a body type that may not be brute strength but was wiry and agile. He wasn't hitting gym sessions with the same fervor as Luke, but he could still get around when he needed to.

Not that he ever really needed to. He lived in New York, and despite the metaphorical references to "jungles," it was nothing of the sort. Not in comparison to the literal jungle he was traipsing through. The incline was tricky, and he was satisfied—when they reached where he was supposed to set up this shelter by the big rock and the trees—he wasn't the only one slightly out of breath. To be fair, Penny probably looked a lot prettier winded than he did. Maybe it was the flushed cheeks that did it for her.

Luke was taking a knife out of the sheath strapped to his belt. With a confident movement, he turned it around and handed it to Alex, handle out. Alex's brows rose, blinking. Was Luke serious right now? Why was he always trying to arm him? Since he'd left Toledo behind, he had been, and would always be, a conscientious objector. It went along with the brooding writer mystique he'd been cultivating for himself. He hadn't held a blade since the Bloodhounds, and really hadn't planned to again.

“You’re going to make spikes on the ends of some sticks. If you can’t find enough limbs on the ground, we’ll have to cut some from the trees.”

Penny was the only one that looked rightfully concerned by Alex being given a knife. Probably because she assumed he wasn’t in the least bit trained for one. Little did she know a knife was probably the only thing other than a laptop he actually knew how to use. Not in this context, mind you, but if you imagined a stick was a tweaker, he was sure he could work out the particulars.

Without another word, he headed toward what looked like some downed branches, gripping one and bringing it up so that he could eye the end. He brought the knife forward, tang down, and began making stripping motions away from himself.

Penny came up seconds later, a worried expression on her face. That lasted only a moment. “Oh, you are doing it correctly.”

He gave her a mischievous smile. One that spread wide across his face. “I’m a wealth of contradictions,” he quipped jovially.

“You’ll want to trim off the other branches, as well. To make the frame.” He nodded, continuing his work with deft hands. It was almost like second nature. Despite the fact he hadn’t held a knife with any amount of weight in it for a long time, and the one in his hand wasn’t quite a switchblade, it was a lot easier than he imagined it would be to relearn the balance and angles he needed to make a proper cut. “Where did you learn to do that?”

He gave her another deep smile. “Didn’t I tell you I used to be in a gang?”

She laughed and he felt his belly warm at the sound. “Shut up.”

“I’m serious. Where do you think I got my leather jacket?”

“The store.” Her expression turned slightly somber. “With your dad, right?” He could feel his own features fall. How in

the hell had she known that? His eyes moved to Luke. It was the only other person in his life who knew, so he must have told her. It was one thing for Penny to know he had been in a gang when he was younger, but it was entirely different for her to know why.

His dad was the president of the Bloodhounds, a motorcycle gang that specialized in running meth. Alex wasn't exactly proud of his family legacy, or the things he'd done in the name of it. He'd never fit in with his dad's friends or the other members of the gang. He was too weird, too dramatic, too bookish, and most importantly, he was cursed with the one thing a criminal wasn't supposed to have—a conscience. The only way he'd managed to escape following in the family footsteps, and most likely his inevitable death, was because his mom had turned his dad over to the feds in exchange for a new life ... somewhere. She must not have wanted him in it, because after everything blew up, Alex hadn't seen his mom, dad, or baby sister since. But that was Toledo Alex, and he hadn't been Toledo Alex in a very long time.

Penny followed his gaze. "Don't be mad. I asked him when you guys were still roommates. You never went home for the holidays, never talked about family, and I wondered."

"When your dad runs a gang, you have a bit of an unconventional learning curriculum. This just happened to be one of my lessons."

"I invited you to the Foster house quite a few times for holidays after that. Don't worry; I know why you said no; no one wants to be at the Fosters for Christmas, the Fosters included." She seemed a little sheepish with her explanation. He'd remembered the first time she had asked him to come to her family's house. He'd said no on principle, not wanting to be a burden to a group of people who were exchanging gifts and being a family. It wasn't necessarily because he'd heard the horror stories about Foster family

gatherings. It really wasn't, and even if it was, he wasn't one to talk. The Joneses hardly had a good track record.

Still, he didn't like the look on her face. The look of insecurity mixed with a little sadness. "I appreciate the offer, Pen, but there was no way you guys could have made enough food for everyone if I was there."

Her gaze came back to his, and he was relieved to find the happy glint restored in full force. "I guess you're right."

"Now, why don't you go find me some more branches? I have a shelter that needs to be mastered."

She scowled playfully. Rolling her eyes as she took languid swinging steps away from him. "Bossy."

He couldn't help his own teasing smile. "Takes one to know one."





## Chapter 3

Knife-wielding superpower aside, and with a lot of help from Penny, the shelter thing was nowhere near as hard as he thought it would be. Maybe it was the fact he'd conquered the tent the day before, but creating stakes, a frame notched into the tree line, and then weaving branches into what could only be described as a cover was nearly second-nature to him. They hadn't gone as far as filling the inside of the shelter with moss, the way Luke described was necessary when it was extremely cold out, but he had to say he was pretty impressed with how it turned out.

He even found need for the useless phone he'd been toting around. Instead of marring Penny's notebook with drawings as awful as his handwriting, he took a few pictures of the shelter and jotted notes he wanted to remember down for when he was writing the process later.

If the walk out had taken ages, the walk back took a century. Penny had insisted they loop around "the long way" so she could point out a few things. It made the journey twice as long, but it did produce a few interesting tidbits regarding nature that he had written down in the notebook.

1. Moss grows on the north side of trees. A possible way to indicate direction if lost without a compass.
2. If lost in the woods, locate a stream or river. Following the current is the quickest way to find civilization.
3. The angle and location of the sun can be used to approximate the time.

The third thing he already knew, he'd heard of a sundial after all. He'd opened a book in his life. But the concept and incorporating it into his story warranted greater

investigation. He underlined number three before closing the book.

When they finally got back to camp, he was tired, sweaty, and hungry. Penny set about getting dinner ready, but Luke was the one who reminded him if he wanted a shower, he was going to have to take it in the lake. The *fucking* lake.

Luckily or not (he couldn't tell), Luke decided to brave the elements with him, and as Alex was toeing off his boots, he had to lament the situation. How did he end up here? Taking a massive bath with another male in tepid water. It all sounded really, really gross.

"Get in, loser."

*Loser, huh? Doth mine ears deceive me?*

He stuck one bare toe into the lake before yanking it back so hard he nearly lost his balance. Luke was watching Alex's struggle with visible amusement. "It's cold!"

"It doesn't get un-cold until you get in. You get used to it."

Yeah, and people just get used to hypothermia.

Luke stripped down to his boxers in a medal-worthy amount of time and ran into the water. He ran until the water started to resist him, about waist height, before he dove in head-first. The balls on this guy. Judging by the temperature of the water, they were probably the size of raisins. Luke emerged with a goofy smile on his face, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "C'mon, dude, get in."

Alex visibly sighed before pushing his own pants over his hips. The first step into the water assured him his toe hadn't just hit a cold spot. The second step proved he never really used his calves anyway, so what was the point of keeping them? Freeze them right off. By the time he was up to his waist and certain parts of his body met certain parts of arctic glacier water, he lamented the children he would have had, because it was now likely kids were no longer a possibility. The water the night the Titanic sank was warmer than this.

He clutched his arms to his chest, his mouth open, making small huffing sounds as he inched his way forward.

"Just get in! You're making it worse," Luke said, swimming in literal circles around him. He glowered at the redhead. Cursing him and his amphibious skin that made him immune to things like cold and satirical humor.

"I'll get in the way I see fit." Which lasted only another few seconds of the waves lapping at Alex's abdomen, prompting him to suck air between his teeth, before Luke ended it. A body hit his from behind and suddenly he felt the pressure of water all around him. He broke the surface with a shuddering gasp. "You're an asshole."

Luke grinned, treading water a few feet away. "Better?"

Alex shoved the wet mass of his hair out of his face. Huh, it actually wasn't so bad now, and, if he really thought about it, it wasn't as bad as it was a few seconds ago either.

He was becoming one of them. One of the reptilian monsters who had stolen Luke's body. This is how they took over the earth. *Land of the Lost* had warned them, but they didn't listen.

"I hate you," Alex swore, causing the boyish grin Luke was wearing to nearly break his face in two.

"You love me."

Alex dipped his head back into the water, letting it lap up around his ears. He wouldn't admit this out loud or anything, but the cool water on his muscles after the day of exercise felt kind of good.

"How are you liking it so far?"

Did Luke want an honest answer? Because Alex wasn't sure he wanted an honest answer. "Y'all outdoors folks are fucking nuts," he said anyway.

"Did you just say y'all?" Luke laughed, kicking his feet up and letting himself float.

"It's a word, Luke. God, be open to other cultures."

"The South is a culture?"

Not in the conventional sense he supposed, but if something as mundane as pop can be classified as a culture, why couldn't mullets, chicken fried steak, and lifted pickup trucks? He was certain they'd driven by a few transplants on the way into the mountains. If the lawn decorations doubling as a parking lot were any indication. Or maybe it was the confederate flag on the front steps, or that when Alex saw it, he lost thirty IQ points. "If man-buns and flannel button-ups is a culture, then yes, Luke, the South is a culture."

"Says you, you're three weeks away from having your own man-bun."

He. Did. Not.

He shoved his hand through the water, splashing the redhead. "Oi, take that back. I wouldn't be caught dead."

"That's what you say now."

"I've dressed like this my entire life. Back in the day it wasn't called being a hipster, it was a sexy little thing called poverty."

"Whatever you say, bro. I know you secretly love being in the in-crowd."

"I hate you," he swore again, but the words contradicted the smile on his face.

They stayed like that, silent, grinning, treading water in the lake with no care to what time it was. Luke's face turned thoughtful. "But seriously."

Ah, yes, the trip.

"It's not all bad, I guess. I didn't really have a lot of experience to create a baseline. It could be worse. There's food." He shrugged, a move he noted was difficult to execute while he was trying not to drown.

"There's food," Luke parroted. "That's a high bar."

"For me? The highest."

Luke spun, looking up the hill toward where they were camped. It was far, probably two hundred feet away from them. Alex could see the thoughts, the memories, pass over his friend's features.

"I don't know why I love it here so much. Some of the best memories of my childhood were here. Each time it was like our own little world. Just Dad and me. Sometimes Penny if her mom would let her come. I guess I just expected you'd feel the same way. Which is stupid."

Alex felt the uncertainty in Luke's voice, and, well, he didn't hate it completely.

"No, it's not. It's fucking beautiful here."

It was just hard for him to acclimate. He'd never done this before, and up until then, he'd never had to lament the fact he'd never done anything like this. It was like peeking behind the curtain, getting to see a glimpse of another person's childhood, a person who grew up happy and loved.

He usually didn't let things like that bother him, but the thought he could have had a childhood like this pricked a little. He could just picture it. He and his sister in the water, splashing each other, throwing rocks, and causing general mayhem at every opportunity. His mom would be cooking over the campfire. His dad would be catching their dinner.

From his spot in the lake, and through the hazy filtered colors of the setting sun, he could see Penny's silhouette moving around the camp. A shower of dancing sparks lit the area from where she must have put a log on the fire.

*Some of the best memories of my childhood were here.*

He bet they were.

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Dinner was simple and delicious. He made a note of it in the notebook Penny had lent him. Something he hoped would make her laugh when he finally gave it back to her. *Penny + Food = \*insert a crudely drawn picture of an angel\**

Hey, an artist he never claimed to be.

Penny went to bed first, and he was happy at least it wasn't him to throw in the towel for a second night in a row. He and Luke had stayed up for another half-hour, plowing

their way through a bag of marshmallows and talking about the Jets. When they finally decided to follow Penny's lead, Luke ducked into the tent to grab their sweats, and they changed outside, hoping not to disturb the sleeping girl already inside. As quietly as he could, he crawled his way into the tent and onto his bed. Placing his clothes above him in his backpack and settling in.

Penny had her back to him again, and he could just make out the nape of her neck beneath the patchwork of the quilt wrapped around her shoulders. Luke came next, settling down with just a plop, not even trying to put his things away. Alex rolled his eyes before turning so his back faced Penny. Not that he didn't trust himself or anything but, just in case.

The back thing apparently didn't work. He didn't know the scientific term for "fucking idiot," but that was who he was. Why couldn't he keep his body off of this woman? Unconscious or not, *Come on, Freud, throw me a friggin' bone*. This shit needed to get worked out so he could stop mauling her in his sleep.

Alex untangled himself from her, yet again, and scooted his body back onto his bed. He'd have to apologize, really apologize to her tomorrow, humiliation be damned. He heard movement in the quiet, from his left, and he forced himself to lay there, to close his eyes and go back to sleep. Until skin met skin, and his eyes revolted against his orders.

The sight of a scrunched face, sleepy-eyed Penny Foster, wiggling her way under his arms would forever hold a place in his mind of favorite Penny moments. He stared, frozen as she pressed herself to his side, her head pillowing against his chest. He let his hand hang awkwardly for a minute, trying to process what was happening. Was this happening? Was he dead? Do people who contract hypothermia hallucinate?

No, if he were dead Penny wouldn't be pressed against him, all soft curves and floral-scented skin. So that could

only mean ...

Fuck it. If this were real life, or even if this was a carefully crafted torture dream because he was in the matrix, he was going to make the most of it. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her just a little tighter against him. She hummed quietly, her palm flat next to her face. She nuzzled herself further into the juncture of his neck, and he angled his head to rest against hers as his eyes flutter closed.

He let pictures of meadows filled with flowers and pretty green eyes lull him to sleep.

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The fire had gone out during the course of the night and starting another one seemed to be the first order of business the next morning. Or it had been when he stumbled his way out of the tent to find both a lack of food and a lack of hot coffee.

Luckily there were still muffins; it was the only reason he was still alive. It had taken longer than normal for him to shake the fog-induced state his brain normally existed in directly after waking up. They needed fire for pretty much everything. It's what separated modern society from the caveman. Flame, fire, bacon, and online streaming services.

It was somewhere in the middle of his musings he finally woke up and was informed they were going to be going over elementals that day. Some of the few important pieces of knowing the woods and being able to navigate them effectively were both fire and water. He knew Penny had come up with it the minute he heard it. It was oddly poetic, and he'd have to cite her for it when he eventually wrote the book.

Despite it having been approximately eighteen hours since his last coffee intake, he thought he was doing pretty well. Especially for a serial coffee-drinker such as himself. He even managed to pay attention to what Luke was saying.



“Rule one of the woods is always practice safe and responsible fire-handling.”

Wasn't rule number one something about location? Maybe that was only important when it came to shelters, but the location of a fire seemed just as important. Forest fires were things, and Smokey the Bear had taught them “only you can prevent one.” Alexander Jones had settled on, never go into the woods and he wouldn't have to worry about it. Look how that turned out. Internetless, coffeeless, and awake before noon.

“Isn't that rule one of sex? Always practice safe and responsible sex?” Alex asked, because he was pretty sure that was also a thing.

“The same bodes well with fire,” came Penny's wry reply.

He tossed her a grin.

*Ah, yes, the familiar adage. One who was to play with fire would most certainly get burned. Knowing his luck, it would probably be him.*

“I'd say fire safety is a bit more important than safe sex,” Luke said gruffly, stacking a handful of wood-kindling in a triangle shape. It looked like a little teepee, and for some reason the configuration prompted the image of miniature Indians in his mind.

Little Indians with very skewed priorities.

Penny was the one who broke first. “In what universe is fire safety more important than sex safety?”

“Also, how can you say that? You've banged your way through half of New York's female population,” Alex continued, motioning in the air as if it held the answer.

Luke had the audacity to look insulted. “I have not.”

“You absolutely have,” Alex deadpanned, crossing his ankles one over the other, followed by his arms over his chest.

“Are you using protection?” Penny sputtered, her face morphed into a look of horror.

"We are not talking about this," Luke grumbled, balling up bits of paper into his hand harshly.

"I think we should. If you can't talk about it, Luke, should you really be doing it?" His voice was laced in amusement. Teasing his friend had to be one of his favorite activities, mainly because the guy could both take it and dish it like an absolute champion. It was one of the reasons why they got along so well, because nothing fazed Luke. Alex could probably flick quarters at him for hours and they'd roll right off.

"I use condoms. Thank you for your concern."

"Every time?" The feminine voice attempted to clarify. He leaned back a little, letting his lips tug into a smirk as he watched the two. Penny with her quiet indignation, Luke as uncomfortable as Alex had ever seen him. He could get used to this.

A red flush was creeping up on Luke's face. His eyes fixed on the firepit as he carefully threaded the paper into the wooden teepee. "Not every time."

"Are you tested regularly?" she pried, punctuated with equal amounts of incredulity. Investigative reporter Penny Foster was on the scene, and he was here for it.

Alex let out a quiet, amused laugh, which earned him Luke's glare. "Shut up. It's too early in the morning to be having this conversation."

Really? Everyone knew damn well that was his excuse. Alex shrugged, letting one of his shoulders rise as he pulled his face into a semi-serious expression. "It's nearly ten now, and it's important. They say you should be tested after every five partners, regardless if you use protection or not."

"That seems excessive," Luke said, balling up more paper.

Excessive? For Alex, hardly. He'd been tested, what? Six months ago? After he and Sabrina had parted ways. For Luke, who went through women as often as he did shirts, he could see how that could end up getting a bit time-consuming.

"I've never not used protection," he said without thinking. Was that really necessary for him to share with the class? Probably not, but it was out there now, he couldn't really take it back.

"Me neither," came Penny's instant response.

He immediately unfolded his arms, raising one hand up. Penny didn't take her eyes off Luke as she reached the distance between them and slapped her hand against his.

"Oh my god, Penny. I didn't want to know that!" was Luke's horrified rejoinder.

"What? So, you guys can talk about banging chicks left and right, and I give one indication that I've even thought about sex and it isn't okay?"

The lady had a point.

"You're like my sister," Luke tried to explain, but even Alex could see he was just digging himself a further hole.

"Who's had sex believe it or not." She paused for a beat, then two. "I'm on birth control, too, and tested yearly at my annual."

Luke frowned. "I don't envy women having to go through all that. There's no way I could take a pill every day. I'd forget."

Alex fought the urge to roll his eyes as the redhead spoke. He definitely appreciated the sentiment; he felt the same way. Yet, the statement in itself showed a level of ignorance that was widespread among the modern-day male.

"There are other options, you know. I have an implant." Penny brought her arm up into the line of sight, motioning to it.

"Oh, right," was the redhead's not-altogether reply.

Alex took that moment to interject a thought. One he'd contemplated dozens of times over the years. "It's tragic women have to shoulder so much responsibility in order not to procreate. Why the hell isn't male birth control a thing? It

makes more sense to unload a gun than to put on a bulletproof vest.”

Penny looked at him, really looked at him. Her brow furrowed, an impressed expression on her face. He couldn't help the satisfied feeling that welled up within him. “Wow, Alex, that's very progressive thinking.”

“Am I wrong?” he offered, bringing his hand up and pressing the pages of the navy book open to a blank page. He fought the urge to write *Fire=sex* on the page in bold letters, knowing it wouldn't particularly endear him to anyone.

“You are not.” She reached across the table as she spoke, placing her hand over his and stopping the dip of his pen to the page. He looked up at her and felt his stomach flip-flop. He swallowed thickly.

Luke, as oblivious as always, didn't seem to notice. “You act like I'm a heathen. I've had sex without protection before, but it was with someone, you know ...”

Penny's hand left his, and he dragged his attention back to his friend by the fire. “No. I don't know.”

“Special.”

Special, huh? Who specifically were these special girls Luke was canoodling with? Alex hadn't seen one, but he'd also never seen an alligator, and he knew for a fact those were real. Real and terrifying, rampaging creatures he hoped he would never meet.

“Oh, well ... that's different,” Penny said, and his gaze was drawn to her once more.

Wait. What?

“Is it?” Alex asked, reaching up and threading his fingers through his hair.

“Yeah, like, if you've known the person, if you've made the decision together. I mean, something like that; you'd really have to trust the person, it's ... well, it's more intimate.”

He felt heat prick at his skin as she watched a winsome flush stain her cheeks. It made her look adorable and alluring and when she caught her bottom lip between her teeth and looked down, he had to stifle some sort of sound from coming out of his mouth. And winsome? Who the fuck describes someone as winsome anymore? What was this, 1895?

“Feels a hell of a lot better, too.”

Insert Luke Browning: Mood-killer extraordinaire.

“Gross Luke!” Penny said, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

“I guess,” Alex breathed, shaking his head a little.

Penny seemed to understand his trepidation and continued, “I think, if you want to be with someone like that, and you do everything right beforehand”—she moved, sitting down on the picnic table across from him; his eyes fixated on her as she motioned toward him—“i.e.: always worn a condom, tested regularly. Why wouldn’t you? If I were in a relationship, a serious one. I could see taking that step.”

He was pretty sure his brain melted at the implication. *Don’t think about it, Jones. Don’t, for the life of you, allow yourself to think about it.*

*Spoiler alert: He was definitely thinking about it.*

“Huh,” was the only thing he could think to say. He was too busy thinking of gross images in order to distract himself. Specifically of the time he’d accidentally walked in on Old Mrs. Perkins as a kid when she was getting out of the shower. That image could kill anything.

“Not like Alex would know, he’s never really dated anyone seriously.”

He felt the tips of his ears turn red as he caught the slashing blade of Luke’s grin from the corner of his eyes.

That wasn’t true, he kind of had. Sabrina and he had been together for .... Scratch that. He not being able to recall the length of their relationship probably wouldn’t sell his protestation. Instead, he stabbed his finger into his own chest. “Hey, this isn’t about me. I’m living the responsible

life here. Luke's the one traipsing around sticking his dick into things."

"Also, gross," Penny said, her nose wrinkling. He had to admit, as far as facial expressions went, she shouldn't be as attractive as she was when she scrunched up her face.

There was a lull of silence between them, and he scratched a few notes about how Luke was building the fire into the notebook for later. When he was finished, he looked back up to see what the others were doing. His eyes met Penny's. She was watching him, closely, and he held her gaze. The pretty flush on her cheeks was still there, and it made him think of inconvenient things, like how far down her body it reached. Her lashes fluttered as the words softly dripped from her lips. "You'd never considered it?"

She did not need to clarify what she meant. Considered it? Of course, he'd considered it before. Who hadn't thought about it? He was a guy, orgasms were a thing. The idea of pushing into a woman with nothing separating them nearly drove him insane on more than one occasion. It didn't help he was having this conversation with Penny, which was enough to make him uncomfortable under the table. Her body was as soft and sweet as it was just lying next to him. He couldn't imagine if ... if ...

*Fuck. Fuck. Stop for the sake of your own sanity. Please stop.* But the thought of pressing himself deep inside of sweet, sexy, arguably witchcraft-affiliated Penny Foster, getting to feel exactly how tightly her body would grip him—him, just him, nothing else—consumed him. He'd get to watch her pretty green eyes darken with lust; he'd get to hear the moans of pleasure filter between her lips.

He was completely hard. He was never going to be able to get up. They were going to have to bury him here.

If she needed a response from him, she didn't get one, and instead turned back to their friend. "You are getting tested when we get back to New York. Seriously, I'm sharing a tent with you!"

Luke dropped another massive pile of wood down next to the firepit, his eyes rolling at the two of them. "We all have different beds. Even if I did have something, which I absolutely do not, you'd be fine."

A point Luke may have, but rational Alex had never been. "We're making a barricade tonight, Penny. We aren't taking any chances," he said to her, knocking the pen in his hand toward her before making a move to press it once more to paper.

"Sounds good to me."

"You guys are ridiculous." Luke was met with nothing but blank stares, to which he finally muttered, after another drawn-out eye roll, a simple, "Fine."

"So, fire-starting, where's the lighter?" Alex asked, patting his pockets. Also, where were his smokes? The lighter was probably stashed in his pack. He didn't smoke all that often, so a pack usually lasted him a few weeks. He had a little over half a pack when he had thrown them into his bag while he was packing. Oh, right, his bag.

He gave himself a casual once-over. He was no longer hard, but he wasn't not hard either. Enough he was sure he could head to the tent and not draw attention. He threw his leg over the bench, just in time to meet Luke holding two rocks out to him.

"No lighter necessary. We're doing this the old-fashioned way."

Well, fuck.





## Chapter 4

He'd been sitting on the ground for nearly an hour, with two shitty rocks in his hands, and the only things flaming were his ears. When Luke had been here and had slowly explained the differences between friction fire-starting and two-stone fire-starting, it was easy to understand. Friction fire-starting was rolling a stick between two hands on an appropriate amount of tinder. He'd had to stop himself from cracking up at that. Hahahahaha. Friction. Tinder. You can't make that shit up.

The second, and the one he envisioned in his head when he thought of his protagonist, Spencer Bradley (two first names for the win), was the two-stone method. He could see Spencer now. Striking rock against rock in the chilled wilderness with shaking hands, his angular face cut with severe creases, blood and dirt caked along his skin, clothes, and cuts. Desperate movements for a desperate man who knew without a spark he wouldn't make it through the night. It was a compelling picture. One Alex had already drafted the emotional component of. Now he just needed the mechanics.

Luke had explained that every fire needed tinder (dry bark that would easily ignite); he mentioned birch to be his preference, and Alex could see a small notched collection of bark beneath the balled-up paper in the teepee. Luke then explained that the two-stone method, referred to both a "striker" and a "hand stone," was the hardest to master. On the open pages of the book sitting directly next to Alex, he'd written down the two words followed by the words quartz and pentlandite. He had nodded along to Luke's explanation. Making notes, as Luke struck rock onto rock, revealing a solid spark.

It looked easy enough at the time. Bullshit. If this were easy, he wouldn't be sitting in the dirt, on the ground, in front of a still-not-lit fire, crisscross applesauce, all Kumbaya, and ease on down the fucking road. How he jumped from folk tales to the *Wiz*, he had no idea. This was what this place was doing to him, sending him down the very laborious road to insanity the likes of Edgar Allan Poe had succumbed to. Where was the talking bird? Where were the ghosts of Lenore's past? WHERE THE HELL WAS THE FIRE?

Starting a fire with stones was going to take much more understanding than just striking two stones together. Apparently, it takes red hair and a delight in your friend's struggle. It was settled. This shit was impossible. Alex's mind wandered to the manifested vision of the hardened soldier, squatting under a tree, bent over a circle of hastily gathered rocks. Small droplets of rain fell sporadically from the sky, threatening to stop him from producing the flame that held the key to life or death. His hands steady even though desperation was crawling up inside of him as he struck again and again and again.

*Sorry, Spence, but you are going to die out there.*

Although investigation was great in principle, something Alex did often when writing, if not constantly, there was something to be said for practical application. He liked to write things that he understood, that he believed. The words flowed freely then, unmuddied by the thoughts in his brain, the ones that screamed *yeah right* when he attempted to force his way through his uncertainty.

So, what were his choices? Write something he was incapable of confirming was possible? Or find a different avenue for survival? Wasn't there something about moss?

"Luke, would you stop laughing at him and explain what he's doing wrong?" Came Penny's voice from somewhere behind him.

Luke chuckled as he made his way over to where Alex was sitting, crouching down on his haunches.

"I'm not going to be able to do it," Alex stated plainly, motioning with the two rocks in his hand.

"Not to sound like a dick, but I'd be really surprised if you did. It took me ... months of consistently trying before I was finally able to do it right. It's not something that you just can *do*. It takes practice."

Well, that would have been good information to have an hour ago.

"And you tell me this now?"

Luke shot him a sheepish expression. "I thought it was important for you to try." He extended his hands motioning for the two stones. "Do you want me to do it?"

"I guess. We need a fire after all." Alex shrugged, pushing himself off the ground and dusting off his pants. "Now I'm just going to have to figure out how to write this without the crippling shadows of failure." He snagged the book off the ground, flicking through a few pages until he reached his notes on fire-starting.

"You can't work out how to write it without actually doing it?"

He could, of course he could. He wrote about the murder of a teenager in upstate New York. It's not like in order to do so he took a nice drive through the countryside, stopped for lunch, bought some antiques, and then committed homicide.

"Yeah, but it feels fake."

"What if you had Penny read the section when you're done with it? She can tell you if it's right or not." There was a thought. Penny was a writer, as well, a phenomenal one. Except ...

"Why don't you read it and tell me if it's right?" he said to Luke, crossing his arms over his chest and giving him an expectant look.

Luke rolled his eyes, striking stone against stone and creating a shower of sparks. Alex felt the tips of his ears turn pink again. Luke struck once, twice, three times, leaned

forward, and blew hard on the tinder. Smoke began to form in curling tendrils. He blew again until small, crackling flames ignited, quickly enveloping the paper in the wooden teepee. It really was an art. Something Alex couldn't help but admire, even if he sucked at it.

"The guy's in the military, right? Any chance he smokes."

*Any chance he smokes?* On occasion, Alex thought, and usually when he was drowning the horrors of the terrible things he'd seen and done with a glass of whiskey, neat. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Luke, the very nonsmoker in this relationship. Lesson one of being a smoker: you never forget your lighter. Whether you're walking to the car or floating the river. You have a fucking lighter.

"Goddamnit."

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With the fire going, the day got increasingly better. The reason why? Because fire made coffee, and coffee made Alex not such a moody bitch. Hey, he'd admit it. Regardless of Luke driving a truck straight through one of his plot holes, he thought, after making another few pages of notes regarding the exact angle and force his friend had hit the two stones together, he could probably write the scene as intended without sounding like a complete phony.

He cringed at himself at his ineloquent use of descriptor.

Phony, fake, imposter, ersatz, false, faux, imitation, man-made, mimic, mock, pretend, sham, simulated, substitute, synthetic. He took a deep breath, letting the words soothe him. Okay. He felt better now.

"So, when's lunch?" he asked after he finished his second cup of freshly brewed coffee.

Penny fixed with him a singular, unamused expression. "You just ate two hours ago!"

*Oh, Penny, baby. Have you met me before?*

"Penny. This is me we are talking about."

She shook her head in what he assumed was disbelief before she moved to one of her endless Mary Poppins food bags. She rummaged in the bright orange one for a second and pulled out a plastic bag of beef jerky. *Fuck, yeah.* He took it happily, his body bouncing as he pulled apart the Ziploc and dove in.

Penny watched him, and slowly her expression changed from exasperated to one that should make him suspicious. Her mouth was tugged up into a smirk, her arms were crossed, and her eyes were dancing. It was the kind of look a person would only want to be at the end of if they knew that, seconds later, it would end in a bed. Seeing as it was coming from Penny, he should expect a) hard labor, b) emotional/physical torture, or c) intense humiliation.

“Enjoy it. I’ll have you know you’re cooking dinner tonight.”

Called it. Wait, what? “I’m sorry. I’m doing what now?”

“Cooking us dinner.”

Well, it was settled. Penny was on drugs.

Copious quantities of mind-altering drugs that would make Woodstock look like a Buddhist monastery. It was the only explanation for those words, at any given time, to expand past her cognitive process and filter their way out of her mouth.

“Are you high?”

She fixed him with an expression that was a mixture of “Are you serious?” and “You’re an annoying little shit.” “No, Alex, I’m not high.”

“Do you want us to die of food poisoning? Because this is how we die of food poisoning.”

She reached across the table, swatting at him. He dodged just in time, but only to hear her chastising. “You won’t die.”

Maybe not, but he didn’t really feel like risking it either. “Penny, I’ve eaten my own cooking before. Believe me when I tell you that you don’t want to wish that evil on anyone.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Alex caught the sight of Luke approaching from the tree line, a series of sticks, string, and the knife in his hand. He looked in his element here. All flannel shirts over white T's and jeans with pockets that weren't just for looks but were actually for holding items essential to the wilderness. Alex, in turn, looked like someone who had made a very wrong turn leaving a Grateful Dead concert.

"What are we talking about?" Luke asked when he'd finally made it to the table.

"Alex's making dinner tonight." Penny waved her hand toward him as she spoke, and Alex could see the instant the words made sense to the newcomer.

"Are you high?" Luke responded, his face twisting into a horrified expression.

Alex threw his hand out to Luke, eyebrows raised into his hair as if to say, "*SEE, SEE. Penny, are you looking?*" Because it didn't feel as though she was looking at how terribly wrong this could go. This was a terrible idea. The worst idea in the world. This was the same kind of a bad idea as sending undersupplied German troops to Russia to fight the Soviet Union on their own turf in the dead of winter.

She huffed, raising her eyes to the sky as if searching for someone else in the desolate wilderness in order to talk some sense into them. "How do you think your guy is going to survive out in the woods for weeks without knowing how to cook something on a fire? It'll help, I promise."

"So, do I file a formal protest? Are there business hours this needs to be submitted by?" Alex asked, pressing his finger down against the wood of the table.

Penny gave him that look again, and he knew he was in for it. "It's your choice, but you can either cook, or we won't be having dinner tonight."

The ultimate ultimatum. Cook or starve. This woman had Slytherin qualities if he'd ever seen them. Cunning little minx. Strange, he had always pegged her as a Hufflepuff.

Not that wizards ever had to deal with this sort of situation. They had magic.

"Tell me, what are we doing until I'm responsible for starting the first viral strain of food poisoning? More fire? Water foraging?"

"Do you want to try the fire again?" Luke asked, a lazy smile breaking across his face.

Alex considered it, more fire meant he'd have to be sitting on the floor again banging rocks together fruitlessly. He'd already failed at one thing today; he may as well try and fail at something else. "Fuck no."

"Then yes, water," Penny affirmed.

"Hit me." Luke reached out immediately slugging Alex hard in the shoulder. Alex brought his hand up to spot. Fixing his friend with his best "What the fuck do you think you are doing?" glare. "Ow!"

Luke smiled and shrugged with more innocence than he should be capable of emulating after smacking someone weaker than himself. "You said hit me."

"You literal bitch."

Double entendre, thy name is Alexander Jones.

Penny laughed, really laughed. The cadence of her giggle was as sweet as the tinkle of bells in a soft summer wind. His stomach fluttered, his gaze dropped to the table. He took a steadying breath trying to focus back on what the woman in question was saying.

"Clean, drinkable, safe water is one of the essential parts of survival. Yes, a person can submit to the elements because of cold, because of starvation, but a person can survive thirty days on water alone. Our bodies are between fifty-to sixty-five percent water. Water, air, warmth, with even as little as that, a person could survive if they really had to. Not indefinitely but long enough."

He fumbled for the blue notebook. Where was it? Where the hell was it? Who took it? He located it wedged underneath Luke's ass cheek. He pulled it out, thumping

Luke on the arm once before opening it and moving to where he'd last left off with his notes. "Wait, go back."

She huffed again, moving forward and brushing his hands away.

"Look. I wrote all of this down so you'd have it." She flicked the pages open to the first page, indicating the crisp clean lines of her writing. He hadn't looked at it before, figuring it to be private, and although she was letting him borrow the book, he didn't want to overstep by reading something he shouldn't. He inspected the notes in navy blue ink. He saw it then, vivid descriptions of shelter, water, fire, gathering, hunting, navigation.

Guilt consumed him. Had she really done all this work for his book? Made all these notes? Done the corresponding research? He already felt bad enough she'd gotten roped into this whole mess. Originally he'd only asked Luke to help him with learning some survival skills. Luke was the one who'd insisted on the camping trip. He was also the one who'd strong-armed Penny into joining them. With the food and the blankets ... she'd already done too much. "Penny, this is like, forty pages of cramped handwriting."

Suddenly there he was, the place he swore he didn't want to be, under her umbrella. The place where the people closest to Penny didn't just camp out, they built homes. Penny would do anything for the people she cared about, and the worst part was, as his gaze caressed the clean lilt of her script, now that he was there, accident or not, he didn't hate it.

"It doesn't mean you still aren't required to take notes. Pen to paper, Jones." She shot him a mock stern glare as she pointed toward the book. The guilt didn't subside completely, but it did lessen as he took in the teasing expression on her face. He folded back to where he had been making notes in the book, jotting himself a not-so-quick reminder to go through all of her notes in finite,



obsessive detail. The same detail he was sure she'd included when she made the notes in the first place.

"Now, the ideal situation if you are lost or are living off the grid is to find a freshwater stream. The current is the most important part. It helps prevent stagnation. I'd still recommend boiling it, but if you don't have the time or the resources, a freshwater stream is going to be the most effective means of getting clean water." He let himself focus back in on the words. Making slanting notes between the thin blue lines.

*Stream/Freshwater — current prevents stagnation — easiest way to get clean water.*

Easy enough. His eyes bounced to the body of water that Penny was silhouetted against. "Lakes?"

She nodded along as she spoke. "If a stream runs into it, yes, then just go to the stream. If not, no. It will have to be purified. There are a ton of things in lakes you do not want to ingest in your body. Algae, parasites, you name it."

He grimaced in disgust before announcing in indignation, "I bathe in there!"

"Do you usually drink your bathwater, Alex?" Cue her amused response, delivered with as much dripping sarcasm he may as well have been delivering the words to Luke.

He had to stop himself from pounding his head onto the picnic table. Penny had his number, and she was dialing it the fuck in. "No," he grumbled with a pout.

"Exactly." She was powering through this, and he was at least enjoying the process of watching how her mind worked. She started bringing out a few items as she spoke. "Now, locating water comes in pretty much three ways. First, you listen. Close your eyes and you try and see if you can find a source of water around you. Follow the sound, find the water. Easy enough?"

How could it not be? She could describe the finer details of open-heart surgery and he'd be able to follow along. "Yeah."

With his affirmation, she started in again, "Second would be, if you can't hear anything, head downhill. By the rule of physics water runs down, so if you're able to find a slope, follow it. It will lead you to the lowest point, and if there's not a stream, there will at least be mud."

He was pretty certain he hadn't heard that correctly. "Mud?"

"Yes. Third way to locate water. Dig."

Apparently, he had. Dig? Like, with your hands? "I am not drinking puddle water, Penny. I don't care how cute you are."

Did he really just say that? Out loud? With his mouth? Cute. *Cute*. Cute? Yes, Penny was cute, but he wasn't supposed to say that out loud to her fucking face. As cute of a face as it was. Those were things he thought inside of his head and never saw the light of day.

"Are you forgetting the entire part about purification? It's not dirty water after it's done."

"Still."

This time, she produced a bucket, setting it before him. "You're lucky I'm not making you go into the woods and dig me a mud puddle." She then, with expectant eyes, motioned for him to head toward the lake. Hadn't he already done this? Like two thousand times when they first got here? He pushed himself up, shooting her a pained expression. He dragged his feet as he ambled down to the water, letting his eyes take into account the scenery. It was a little cooler today than it had been yesterday, and he was comfortable in his light blue jean jacket with the Sherpa collar.

When he finally got to the edge of the lake, he crouched down, tipping the bucket into the water and letting liquid pool into it. The lake was placid, serene, and the action of dipping the bucket sent a shock of ripples through the unbroken glassy surface. Filling a bucket wasn't exactly rocket science, so as soon as he crouched down, he was standing back up, letting the twittering of birds accompany

him as he walked back toward the table, the water sloshing from the pail in his hand.

Penny was working around the fire, moving her body up and down from standing to crouching. He watched her as he moved closer and closer to where she was working diligently. She heard the crunching of his boots on the gravel and turned as he put the bucket next to her and the fire.

His brows rose as he took into account the homemade distillation system before him. A teapot set onto the grate, a copper pipe secured with a clamp on both the pot and an empty two-liter bottle.

She motioned to the contraption, a pretty flush staining her cheeks as he picked up the blue book and began scratching notes into it. "You probably know how this works better than I do," she said quietly, motioning toward the homemade system.

He could see the slight shift in her expression. Nothing dramatic by any means, but enough he could see a fracture in the confident, teasing mask she always seemed to be wearing. It was almost as if she was embarrassed, or self-conscious, but that couldn't be right. He was probably misreading things; it would not be the first or the last time.

"I still want you to tell me." Their gazes held for a long time. He couldn't help the searching quest of her face. His eyes lingered on the flush of her cheeks, the cut of her cheekbones, before they settled on her lips, where he traced each vertical line creasing the flesh.

When he realized how absolutely creepy he was being, staring at her mouth like a starving man looking at a burger—with extra pickles, add bacon, hold the tomato—he looked back into her eyes. He watched as her lashes fluttered and she moved to transfer the bucket of water into the teapot to let it boil.

*Way to show your cards, Jones. You might as well have been wearing them in the brim of your hat.*

After the laborious process of purifying water, and he meant laborious, he was finally sitting down. Who knew it would take so much freaking time to make water? The process took forever, continually boiling, filling, filtering, until what seemed like a decade later when Penny announced they'd managed to fill half of the two-liter bottle. Half. Only half.

He had to make another trek down the lake for more water in order for them to repeat the entire arduous process over again. When they were done, and they were letting the extremely overworked teapot cool down, Alex couldn't help but wipe his hand across his brow. If he thought fire was hard, water had kicked his ass. He'd need another lake bath tonight.

At least he was able to understand the dynamics of water distillation. In depth, if he did say so himself. The science was something he could easily comprehend, something that took patience, not skill. He might not have enjoyed the work involved, but he had liked it was something he was more than capable of doing. When Penny, looking incredibly nonplussed, sidled up to him, he was grateful for the cold water she offered. Especially since he had no part in collecting it. They sat silent for a few moments, each drinking water. He doubted she was going to let him off easy, but just in case, he figured he might hint toward the topic of their conversation earlier to see if maybe she'd changed her mind.

"So, what are we cooking?"

She leveled an evil and excited grin at him, and he knew there would be no such luck. "It needs to be something you can locate in the woods. As nice as it would be to say we are grilling steaks tonight, it's not really practical. So, while we were mastering water purification, I had Luke go set some traps."

Ah, the infamous traps that had humiliated him. The ones that had made it onto Luke's top-ten Alex clap backs. Yes,

there was a list. Yes, it was maintained. "Human traps," he quipped.

She leaned forward a little bit and he felt his heartbeat falter. "Yes, human traps. Hopefully Luke caught something, or we'll be going hungry tonight."

Now that would be the clear and real definition of a tragedy.

"You wouldn't really let me go hungry, would you, Pen?" The minute he said it, he wished he could take it back. Not because of the words. In fit, form, and function, the words were clear and consistent. It was a succinct inquiry if one person would let the other person starve. Except for when Alex said it, elbow leaning on the table, eyes set to hers, the words came out seductive. His voice low, teasing, causing the flush on her cheeks to creep below the neckline of her sweater.

He wasn't even aware of what made a person seductive, let alone that he had the ability to accomplish it.

She bit into the plush cushion of her lower lip. He nearly groaned at the sight. She shifted, not much, just a little, but a fraction of an inch closer to him. His heart thumped wildly as he did the same, their legs moving just a smidge closer together. Were they doing this? Were they flirting with each other?

The answer to those questions would have to wait because seemingly on cue, Luke manifested from a tree line with something dead dangling from his hand. Alex rose quickly, probably too quickly to be considered normal behavior, and stepped toward his friend. He raked his palms against his pants in an attempt to calm his nerves. Luke was finally close enough to see what the animal was. Based on the head, Alex could tell it was a rabbit, but where the rest of the fluffy, adorable fur was supposed to be, was nothing but pink skin. It was a skinned rabbit.

He gagged. He gagged again.

He barely heard Penny's chastisement through the audible manifestation of his gag reflex. "You didn't make *him* do it?"

*Do what, Penny? Murder the Easter bunny? Peter Cottontail? My hopes and dreams?*

Luke gave him a sympathetic look. Alex proceeded to keep his fist over his mouth and his eyes anywhere else in an attempt to dispel any other roiling revolts of his stomach. He knew food used to be animals, but when he ate meat, he got it at restaurants and from stores like every other normal person in New York. He didn't have to see they had heads, and they weren't looking into his soul with their cold, dead, betrayed eyes.

"Baby steps, Penny. He nearly tossed his cookies just looking at it."

*Oh, thank god. Luke, you may literally be my knight in shining armor.* No wonder women swooned over this chap. If he were into guys, and Luke had just pulled that move, well, he wouldn't say no to a drink ....

Alex thought he'd gotten control of himself, until Penny informed him he had to force the skewer through the rabbit so they could roast it over the fire. He gagged again. Embarrassment may be the least of his worries. He was going to have to figure out how to keep his dinner down.



## Chapter 5

Penny came to bed last that night. She'd been lost in a book, fiction—sci-fi he noted. He wrinkled his nose at her choice of genre but figured, hey, no one was perfect. Even someone he considered the closest thing to perfect he'd ever see. He couldn't fault her for wanting the solitude when she waved the two boys off, telling them she'd be there soon. She probably wanted some time to recharge without the constant pressure of taking care of two nearly helpless men.

Except Alex couldn't sleep. He didn't know why, physically he felt exhausted. Everything about the day, the work, and his mind were pointing him very firmly toward slumber. Yet no matter how he laid down, what he thought about, or how many sheep he counted, it wouldn't come. By the time he heard the telltale unzipping of the tent, it was so dark he could barely make out her figure as she slowly stepped one leg then the other into the quiet confines. He held his breath, taking in her silhouette as she quietly made her way to her bag and fished out her tank top and shorts.

Luke's snores punctuated the darkness, and when she thumbed her hands into the waist of her jeans and tugged them off, he thought he'd have a mild heart attack. He should close his eyes. He should most definitely close his eyes.

*Spoiler alert: He didn't.*

Her legs were long, seamless, and went on for basically forever. Her underwear was light, he couldn't tell in the dim light, but the fabric was pale enough to be either white or a light pink. She turned and he got an eyeful of her ass, peeking out from high cut lace.

Jesus Christ, he was going to die right there on the spot.



Penny's eyes met his, and he seconded his statement. Especially when she rolled her eyes and gave him a playful smile. She tugged the small little shorts over her illegally long legs. This woman was going to kill him, either by legitimate homicide or inconvenient daydreams at inopportune moments. He'd probably never get the picture of her ass out of his mind, not even if they perfected mind-altering laser technology and attempted to burn the image out of him.

He never considered himself a particular kind of man. He liked women for a multitude of reasons: their eyes, their smiles, he even had a bit of a fixation with a girl's collarbones at one point. But goddammit, if Penny's backside hadn't converted him. Nice to meet you, Alexander Jones, converted ass-man here to spread the good word.

His teeth ached, and he realized he wanted to press his blunt teeth against her pert flesh. Who even was he anymore? He sounded like a complete savage reduced to only his base instincts. Not a self-proclaimed intellectual with strong feminist sentiments.

Next came her shirt, and he bit his lip when she revealed her bra, which was the same light fabric as her panties. He was sure of it, even though her lower half was now covered up, he'd never been more sure of something in his whole life.

They matched. They fucking matched, and that did *things* to him.

The newly exposed expanse of skin was quickly replaced by the soft, white tank top, and he breathed a small sigh of relief. Normal-clothed Penny was something he could nearly resist. That was, up until she reached her arms around her back, unclasped her bra, and pulled it out of the hole in her tank top with such practiced ease he was certain black magic was involved.

Penny wasn't wearing a bra. Penny Foster wasn't wearing a bra. Penny. Foster. Wasn't. Wearing. A. Bra.

His gaze froze on the swells of her breasts through the thin material. He wished it was colder, lighter, and he could see the tiny pinpricks of her nipples through the fabric. She made quick work of folding up her jeans and her long-sleeved shirt, stuffing them into her bag and then wiggling her way under her comforter. He turned his head, watching her as she settled against her pillow. Her eyes met his again and ... well ... shit ... It's not like they hadn't already ... but every time they had ended up in each other's arms, there was a not fully conscious component to it. Maybe that was all it was, a sleep-addled decision for the sake of comfort. Or did she enjoy the solace and warmth of his body as much as he did hers? There was only one way to find out. Now he just needed to find the courage to do so.

He took a breath, his eyes searching hers for a hint of trepidation. He opened his arm, a clear invitation. One she immediately took, moving the short space between them to rest her head on his chest.

He still couldn't understand what he did to turn karma this far in his favor, but he made a mental note to figure it out and do it repeatedly from here on out. She once again did the little nuzzling thing into his neck as he wound his arm around her. Her leg moved, settling crooked on top of his, and since he had negative impulse control when it came to her, he settled his other hand on her leg to pull it up and over him. He glided his palm over smooth skin, and he could feel her answering smile against his bare chest. She felt like velvet.

Alex edged his fingertips against her shorts and played with the hem, a contented smirk tugging at his lips. He tried to memorize every facet of that moment—the sound of Luke's snore, the crickets chirping in the background, and the weight of Penny against him. Despite the addition of Luke, the tent, and the woods, he never fell asleep so quickly in his life.

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This whole waking up thing was getting a hell of a lot easier. In fact, when his eyes opened and he saw the clear rays of the sun shining through the tent, he didn't want to rip the thing down and throw it in the lake. Which was saying something, because he had vowed the very first day to never cede his unadulterated hatred for the fucking things, shelter be damned. If Alex ever found himself in this situation again, he'd sleep outside, hell, he'd use his newfound shelter skills and build a place to sleep before he had to willingly tangle with one.

After he woke not on the verge of tent-icide, the morning consisted of two things. They had coffee, which was still as blissfully perfect as always, and they had to go searching for firewood, an activity that seemed damn near constant. The scary thing was, Alex didn't really mind. If he didn't know any better, he might have thought he was starting to enjoy this. Even when Luke handed him the axe and indicated he needed to start chopping up a fallen log. To be honest, that was kind of fun.

He wasn't sure what Penny was doing, because she was nearly a ghost after she handed him a piping hot cup of Joe. He had been face-first in the pages of the blue notebook she had given him, scribbling down the methodical and precise ways Spencer was navigating his fourth day on the run when Luke had picked up the axe and motioned toward the woods. Alex, of course, hopped up from his place at the picnic table and followed him, not even considering this could be the exact moment Luke was going to do him in. The thought never even crossed his mind. He was getting soft.

It was only after an hour of scavenging and chopping that Alex inquired where Penny was, axe in hand, feeling every bit as savage as he felt. Luke had lifted one hulking shoulder, and without looking, told him she was probably bathing in the lake.

Let's just say that wasn't what he needed to hear when he was mainlining adrenaline through his veins like it was fucking heroin. A whole slew of images welled up inside of his mind. Penny's perfect ass, the heavy sag of her unsupported breasts under her tank top, the image of him pressing inside of her—one he had tried, and failed, not to picture.

He was glad Luke was distracted with tying up the wood they'd found thus far (so it was easier to drag back to camp) because the flush of his face wasn't solely attributed to physical exercise. Not that Alex was going to bring attention to it. That was the last conversation he wanted to have.

*Hey there, bud, have you noticed that Penny's a ten? No? Just me? Cool.*

The thoughts kept lingering. What would Penny look like emerging from the lake, water sluicing in beaded rivulets down her body? What did her bathing suit look like? Good god, was she even wearing a bathing suit? Let's hope, for his sake, she wasn't. Of course, unless Luke was there, then let's hope she was, so he didn't have to slug his best friend in the face.

He was not normally a violent person. Hated violence in fact. It probably had to do with the whole father/prison/gangland past. Yet, the idea of Luke getting to see Penny in any state of undress made him nearly hysterical—throwing hands kind of hysterical. Which made no sense, because Luke was his best friend. Penny was Luke's best friend, and Alex had no say in what either of them did.

He'd blame it on the axe. Yeah, it had to be the axe.

With the firewood both chopped and secured, they ventured back to camp. Penny was still nowhere to be seen and he took that as a blessing. He hadn't yet recovered from the mental images dancing inside of his head. Coupled with the firsthand knowledge he already had of her—i.e., her legs were the softest things known to the modern world; she was

entirely too tempting for her own good, and she had the body of a siren—it was a bit of a trying morning.

But, hey, at least the waking up part was easy. Right? Right.

Remember the time he said he didn't have a thing for Penny? It may or may not have been the complete truth; and by may or may not, he meant not. Maybe, just maybe, taking into account recent developments that had transpired nightly since they started cohabitating in the cursed tent, and really every moment before then, he might have developed a bit of a crush on her.

God, he couldn't believe he actually admitted it.

Could anyone really blame him though?

They deposited the wood in a heap next to the firepit. Luke took a lot more time than Alex thought was necessary to stack it. He vaguely considered asking Luke why. There had to be a reason—there seemed to be a reason for everything out here—but he couldn't find the mental resilience to do it.

Alex's eyes kept flitting toward the lake. He couldn't see the signature blonde head of hair that belonged to Penny bobbing along the surface, or her figure silhouetted against the picturesque landscape, and yet, he kept looking. With every bounce of his eyes toward the body of water, he told himself, "Stop Alex. Just Stop."

He never did.

He just couldn't help it. It was as if he was possessed.

After what was most likely the sixtieth time in a matter of minutes, he realized he had a problem. One, he desperately needed to distract himself from. He needed to find something, anything to think about other than seeing Penny wearing decidedly less than the conservative sweaters and generously cut jeans he usually saw her in. He found it on the edge of the clearing, with a purple flower peeking out of tall grass. It was pretty, really. As far as flowers go. Pretty in

an exotic way that intrigued him, and he wasn't quite sure why.

"Hey, Luke, what kind of flower is that?" Alex took a few steps toward it, crouching to look at the vivid slope of its petals. It was unlike anything he'd seen before. Not in a book, not in the countless flower markets in New York.

The words flowed freely through his mind. Exotic, beautiful, enticing, tempting, attractive, inviting, fascinating, captivating, engaging, enthralling, tantalizing, stimulating, thought-provoking, interesting.

Luke interrupted his internal tangent, "I don't know, we should ask Penny. She's practically a Disney princess when it comes to that sort of thing." He had barely given the flower a second glance before turning back to the stacks of wood.

"What am I now?" The sound of her voice sent Alex to his feet in a flash. He turned, staring at her as his gaze bounced between her newly manifested figure and his crouched friend. She was clothed (of course she was clothed; she was a person in the elements), but her hair was wet, and she was still running a towel through the muted blonde of her sodden locks.

He was amazed she looked just as good with spiky lashes and the pink flush of a fresh face. Better even. Alex brought his right hand up to run through his hair. Smooth, Jones. Real smooth.

"A Disney princess," Luke responded automatically, not bothering to turn around, or in Alex's case, jump out of his skin as though someone told him a giant spider was behind him. Luke, seemingly satisfied with the way the wood was positioned, moved on and was now adding more freshly cut logs to the fire.

She smiled, arching an eyebrow at Alex, whose stomach was doing a dance he could only assume was a polka. "Well, I'll never turn down being compared to royalty, but I'm interested in your rationale."

Alex's gaze dropped as he ambled forward, planting himself at the picnic table, hoping sitting down, not making direct eye contact, might stop him from acting like a total putz. With the fire properly maintained, Luke followed suit, threading his legs into the opening of the picnic table next to where Alex sat.

"You know everything about plants. Like everything there is to know," the redhead said, leaning forward to grab an apple from the basket on the table.

Food. Now that was an idea. Alex did the same.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could barely make out Penny walking over to a thin rope tied between two trees, tossing the towel she had been using to dry her hair over it.

"That's it?" Came the faraway filter of her voice. "Which mythical princess' superpower is plants, remind me?"

He took a massive bite of the apple, not even thinking before he spoke. "Pocahontas taught the occupants of Jamestown how to harvest and grow edible native plants. Without her, everyone would have died."

From next to him, Luke continued, "Aurora picked berries."

Not particularly eloquent, but not inaccurate either.

Alex racked his brain. "I'm sure Mulan had a basic understanding of medicinal herbs and flowers; that was a common study for women in the Ming Dynasty."

Luke turned to him, apple suspended in midair. "Alice may not have known a lot at the beginning, but she definitely learned quickly. With the flowers and mushrooms as such."

Alex nodded, his lip jutted in appreciation. "Nice!"

Immediately Alex reached the hand not holding the apple out, bumping his fist against the man sitting next to him.

Penny was standing in front of them with an amused expression on her face, her hands bracketed on her hips. She shook her head, pulling a brush out of her bag. "Okay, I'm impressed. Luke grew up with me, so he has a valid

excuse for knowing so much about Disney characters. What's yours?"

She started pulling the brush through her wet strands and the constant pull of hair away from her face made her features look sharper, more striking.

"I'm offended! I have a little sister, you know. Fairytales have existed for centuries, long before Disney got their hands on them. They're a childhood staple and are in no way gender-specific." He might not know where his sister was, but up until she was eight, he had been subjected to nothing but dancing bears, painted wings, and things he almost remembered.

Okay, maybe he was too good at this.

She chuckled, continuing the therapeutic brushing. Why was he enjoying watching this? He was sure he wasn't supposed to be enjoying this.

"No offense meant. I was just wondering. You don't really strike me as the cartoon type. Hitchcock and Kubrick? Yes. Feel-good children films? No."

*Hitchcock? Kubrick? You mean the founding fathers of cinema? The most influential and groundbreaking directors of the twentieth century?* They'd known each other for seven years, things get garbled through the filter of time, but he didn't think he'd ever mentioned his Hitchcock obsession around her before. They'd had an in-depth discussion about Tarantino once when he had offhandedly called her Beatrice Kidd, to which she responded, without hesitation, "I prefer the Bride." Hitchcock, however? No, he would have remembered she had made that correlation about him. He shot her a smirk. *Penny, baby, talk dirty to me.*

"I mean, well, yes. But if you think I also don't know every word to 'Under the Sea,' you're out of your mind."

With her hair now brushed, she gathered the wet locks up on the top of her head, securing it with the black hair tie around her wrist. "Dance moves, too?"



“Fully choreographed. I’m impossibly light on my feet.” If, of course, light on one’s feet meant capable of tripping over them at any opportunity.

She grinned at him. “You know it takes a very secure man to admit that.”

“Secure is my middle name.”

She rolled her eyes. “What exactly am I supposed to use my Disney princess powers on?” she asked, putting her brush away. She stretched her neck, one hand coming up to knead at the flesh. Her sweater shifted, and he saw the faintest pinprick of a mole against her alabaster skin.

Alex instantly wondered what it would taste like against his tongue.

He stood quickly, too quickly, abandoning his apple, lumbering toward the flower he’d asked about earlier. He took a steadying breath before he crouched back down. “What kind of flower is this?”

Penny came up behind him, mirroring his crouch with her own. He kept his eyes forward, but he couldn’t mistake his body’s reaction to her proximity. It was like the molecules in his skin were vibrating, humming where they were closest to hers. “It’s called a gypsy flower. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t actually know the scientific names of every flower. Sorry to disappoint you.”

He scoffed. “I’m pretty sure the words disappointment and Penny Foster don’t even exist in the same universe.”

She flushed, and for the thousandth time in the course of the last couple days, he thought about how much he really liked he was able to make her do that. “I wasn’t planning on doing plants and flowers for a few more days, but if you are interested, we could move it up to today.”

The prospect of getting to spend more uninterrupted time with Penny? He would willingly run to sign up for that. “Yeah,” he said, giving her a small smile. “I don’t think hunting will ever be my strong suit. The gathering/foraging aspect might be more up my alley.”

Luke piped up from behind them, "So, basically, if we were in prehistoric times, you'd just die."

He wasn't wrong.

"Gatherers had their place, even in prehistoric times," Penny chided, standing up and facing Luke, hands on her hips.

Luke shot her a lazy smile and Alex took his time moving to stand and join their conversation. "Yeah, it was called women."

Penny walked forward, slapping Luke on the shoulder. "You're a pig."

Alex swaggered the few feet back to the table, the heels of his boots scuffing loudly against the dirt beneath his feet. "Eh, I'm a progressive guy. I'm more than happy to be the gatherer while my cavewoman goes out and hunts."

Penny's lips turned up into a small smile, and Luke laughed loudly. "Alex, I think that would mean you'd be eternally single, before you eventually died."

No stranger to a good joke at his expense, he followed it instantly, "So, the exact same as now?"

Luke grinned. "Exactly."

Penny grabbed her backpack and Alex picked up his abandoned apple to take another crunching bite. She took stock of the contents inside, rummaging around before moving over to grab a bottle of water. After a few seconds of distracted silence, she spoke, "Great, make sure you grab your notes, we'll be hiking." Alex wasn't surprised by her instructions; at this point, he expected anything they did out here would take an insane amount of effort. "Luke, do you want to come?" she asked as she motioned to grab a third bottle of water.

Luke responded by finishing his apple and chucking it toward the compost bin. It went in dead center. This guy and his natural athleticism. "Honestly? No, but I do want to set a few more traps, so I might meet you out there in a little bit."

Alex gagged on instinct. There was a high likelihood he wouldn't survive the sight of another mutilated rabbit. He just wouldn't. Especially if he was going to be responsible for further violating animal corpses in the name of dinner.

Penny swung the bag onto her back. "Are you ready?"

He finished his apple, forgoing further humiliation as he walked over to the compost pit before lightly tossing the core in. He didn't want to hurl an apple core, probably nowhere near where it was intended, and then have to go over to pick it back up. He'd save that gem of humiliation for another day. He met her at the edge of the forest, looking down and giving her a reassuring smile. "Ready when you are, Sleeping Beauty."

She reached out, pinching him on the elbow.

He'd meant it as a joke, adding to their Disney conversation earlier, but he wouldn't lie and say he wasn't also alluding to their clandestine snuggling arrangements. They'd danced around the subject a few times, with carefully cloaked innuendos and teasing looks, but they'd never outright talked about it. He didn't want to be that guy, the one who hastily asked, "Hey, so what are we doing? Like to clarify. Is this active-snuggling or passive-snuggling? But not in a weird way. Like in a clarifying way?" However, he did wonder, but it was too soon for those kinds of questions, even though they kept creeping up in his mind. He'd seen the very same line of questioning send women running in the complete opposite direction, and he didn't want that.

"Owe!" he grumbled, grabbing the place where she'd pinched him. Alex pouted, and she rolled her eyes again. Then they were moving, stepping past the tree line, out of expectancy and toward singularity.

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Berries, he found, were his new favorite topic. Mainly because as Penny led him through the woods, pointing out

which ones were suitable for human consumption, which ones weren't, and which ones would definitely kill him, he got to eat. Sure, they had brought a basket to gather berries to bring back to camp, but having a basket didn't mean he couldn't take a sample here and there. Large samples. Often.

Thus far, they'd run across raspberries, mulberries, blackberries, and elderberries. All of which were delicious, though he had to admit the blackberries were his favorite. During their walk, Penny had also pointed out some other plants that were edible, but none of them sounded particularly appetizing. He didn't know what a pigweed was, but he definitely was not eating it anytime soon.

After they found a thatch of edible berries, they went to work picking silently. Penny kept the basket, and with the lack of another receptacle, he'd resigned himself to using his shirt. He had it pulled out, supported by his fingers, bowing into the shape of a bowl. He was lucky he was wearing black today or the way he was going at it, he would have definitely ruined something by now.

They were moving in opposite directions down a line of blackberries, which seemed to be the type of plant that took over everything. The bushes were massive, the berries fat and juicy, and the thatch they were working through seemed to go on forever. Not to mention the stickers. Fuck the fucking stickers. His thumb was screaming at him.

He had been working for a while, his shirt starting to get dangerously full as he made his way around the heavy reeds of the bushes plucking berries. On this end, the long reeds were twisted with some sort of green plant he couldn't identify. He figured he'd ask Penny what it was when he walked over to give her the spoils of his labor.

Alex was planning on grabbing a few more berries before he made the short trek over to where she was crouched. He reached carefully through the barbed branches, but when his wrist brushed against one of the green leaves, it immediately stung. It *really stung*. He jumped back, the shirt

full of berries cascading to the ground as he grabbed his wrist with his opposite hand. "What the hell? Mother fucking fuck, I've been poisoned!"

He rubbed at the redness of his wrist, trying to soothe the pain, but it didn't help. If anything, it made it worse. Penny was suddenly at his side, eyes bouncing between the green abomination and the red bumps on his skin. "Yeah, you definitely don't want to touch those."

*You think, Penny? Do you think?* "I think, in the future, you should always start with the things that are going to kill me."

She pursed her lips in displeasure, giving him a stern look before tenderly wrapping her fingers around his wrist and bringing it closer to her. She inspected the damage for a few seconds, rolling his arm, her thumb brushing over the raised marks. "Stinging nettles won't kill you, even if you strip naked and dive right in. You can, however, eat them if you're desperate."

"Let's not do that. Ever." He didn't need his insides on fire, too. If he wanted that, he'd just eat at Taco Hell.

"Hold on," she said, eyes bouncing around before she was dashing away from him. He didn't follow her, just stood, eyes fixed on the mark, mentally cataloging whether his affairs were all in order. He already knew they weren't, and he made a mental note if he ever made it back home, he needed to document his last wishes in writing. She was back at his side. "Here."

She produced what looked like a basic fern, something he'd seen every few feet during their lesson, and rubbed the underside of the leaves against the raised bumps on his wrist. The stinging began to subside, his eyebrows flew up so high they nearly reached the brim of his hat. "Whoa, that actually feels better."

She turned the fern over in her hand, laying it flat on her open palm and motioning to the tiny pustules smattering the backs of the leaves. "See these? They counteract the

stinging from the nettles. It won't relieve the redness or the bumps, but it will take away the pain."

His eyes fixed past the fern to her hand, to the smattering of dark red marks staining her palm.

"Hey, Penny, did you get hurt?" He plucked the fern from her hand, bringing her palm up so he could take a better look at the series of arcing wounds. She only allowed him to hold it for a second before she was curling her fingers into her palm.

All of a sudden, he understood. Understood that the marks on her hands didn't come from a plant, or wood, or the slip of a knife. She had done them to herself. Once realization dawned, and he was sure it was also apparent on his face, she was backing away instantly, pulling her arm from him and hiding her hand behind her back.

She was babbling, her eyes everywhere but his, her cheeks as bright as cherries. "I think that's enough for today. I'm going to head back to camp. You have the compass, right? You can make it back without me? It'll be good practice."

He stood, watching her disappear, her body bounding as she hurried away from him, head down. He stared after her, listening to the echoing sounds of her movements fading into the wilderness. The forest was still, serene, with nothing but the quiet sounds of water trickling over the rocks from the nearby stream and the occasional chirp of a bird.

It was the kind of quiet he should revel in, should steep himself in. Silence, which in any other moment would give him pause to press pen to paper, to let the words flow freely, unhindered. Now, all he could think of was the volatile irony that such a quintessentially peaceful location, a quiet clearing in the lush countryside, would reveal the loud turmoil waging war inside of Penny.



## Chapter 6

Things were different. Markedly, notably different.

Penny was quiet as they all returned to camp. Alex had taken his time, gathering up her backpack, the basket, the mess of abandoned berries that littered the ground where he'd dropped them. He couldn't stop the internal assault on his mind as he obsessively recalled what had happened over the course of the last four days. Everything about Penny was so effusively happy. He was perfectly aware no one, not even Penny Foster, was always sunshine and rainbows, but this? How had he missed this?

Those thoughts followed him into camp where they were met with more quiet. His eyes were trained on the rigid set of her shoulders. They would then move to Luke, who was sharpening the end of a stick to make another skewer for whatever he caught in his traps. How the hell was he not seeing this? Turn around. Look at her! But Luke never did. Never questioned why Penny was less talkative than usual.

Though Alex had spent countless moments considering the weight on Penny's shoulders over the years, how she was always helping, cooking, cleaning up after others, what had he really done to help? To stop her? To let her know she didn't have to?

As she carefully set up everything required to make dinner, he sat directly in front of her, eyes trained on her face. "Can I help you?" he asked.

She stilled as her eyes met his, hands in midair. She only made it a few seconds before her gaze dropped back down to the basket of potatoes in front of her. "That's not necessary."

He couldn't help but think they were talking about more than just potatoes. This conversation was a lot deeper, it



meant more. He wanted to reach out, to clasp her hands in his as he spoke, but he didn't. He kept his hands on the table between them, braced along the edge. "I'd really like to."

Her lashes fluttered and he thought, just for a second, he may have crossed a line. She had run away from him when he had first seen the marks on her palm. Had retreated so soundly into herself he could only assume she wanted to bury the subject far underground and never, ever bring it back up. Except he didn't want her to do what she always did, what he assumed was the very thing that resulted in ... well, this.

He wanted her to say "yes." He wanted to pull her away from the camp, to look her in the eyes without the veil of artifice and ask her what he could do to make it better. To ask her what she did to fight it, how it made her feel. He wanted to tell her how it made him feel. He wanted to assure her she had nothing to be ashamed of. That she didn't need to hide it, but he'd settle for a "yes."

He waited, his eyes imploring, trying to communicate the thousands of things zipping around in his mind. Finally, she nodded. "How do you feel about peeling potatoes?"

"I'd love to." And for the first time, when it came to a mundane action that couldn't possibly bring anyone joy, he meant it.

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He helped with the potatoes, something he'd done maybe three times in his entire life. His finger, his middle finger, specifically on the top knuckle, was screaming at him. Who knew potato peelers could be so dangerous? He'd nicked the digit not once, but twice, and the second time resulted in him sucking the finger into his mouth until the bleeding finally ebbed.

There was a silent understanding between him and Penny. One that made him feel a fraction calmer as dinner was finished and they all sat down to eat. It lasted only a second until Luke handed Penny his finished plate without even looking at her. She took it without hesitation, moving toward the large plastic tubs she used to wash and rinse the dishes. Alex was up in seconds with his own plate, depositing it on the table and grabbing the buckets they kept under the table.

"What are you doing?" she asked, reaching forward and grabbing his plate, adding it onto the stack.

He looked at her, buckets hanging from either of his hands, and gave her a genuine smile. "Getting us water so we can do the dishes."

Alex barely caught her smile, just noting the upturn at the edges of her lips before she buried her chin to her chest. He swelled with pride as he walked down to the lake. When he returned, full buckets in hand, she was somber again, and it made him frown. He poured the buckets into the plastic tubs. One for washing, one for rinsing. A weak "thank you" was all she gave him. He grabbed her lightly around the waist, guiding her to the side as he took her place directly in front of the wash bin. "I wash, you dry."

It was fair. He'd had a mother once, and she had always preached to "never let the cook, clean." It wasn't something he had taken to heart nearly as often as he should have, but he was finding himself increasingly motivated to turn over a new leaf. Not just because of Penny, well, yes, but ...

He didn't know how to describe it. It wasn't solely the guilt over how he and Luke had treated her over the years. He did it because, despite himself, he didn't want her to do it alone.

It was only a few anyways, the potatoes and meat they ate for dinner only required a pot, their plates, and some silverware. He soaped each item as best he could, hoping he was doing it right as one by one he handed each item to her.

She dunked each one into the clean water bin, inspecting it before toweling it dry and putting it to the side. When they were nearly done, and she was dipping the last plate into the now slightly dark rinse bin, his hand followed. Hidden in the cool water of the bin, he stopped her. Moving the plate from her grasp, threading his fingers through hers.

She went impossibly still. He'd give anything to be able to lean forward, to ghost his lips against her brow, to ease the tension in her frame, to whisper into her hairline she was impossibly beautiful. That he still thought she was the most beautiful person on the planet, but he couldn't. Both because they weren't alone and he didn't know if he could.

After a few moments, he gave her hand a light squeeze before removing it from her tub and dunking it in his own to rinse out the sponge. She stayed still for a few moments before she finally removed the last plate and toweled it dry.

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Penny went to sleep first. Though the hard set to her features had eased, it was nowhere near the carefree girl he knew. Alex waited to follow her until Luke said he was ready to go to sleep. He wanted to give her space, and he'd definitely crossed more than a few lines today with the secret discovery and covert hand-holding. He could tell the minute they entered the tent she wasn't asleep. Her breathing was too even, the set of her shoulders facing away from them too stiff. He cursed himself for not coming to bed sooner and getting a few uninterrupted minutes with her. Instead, he shucked off his clothes, shoved on his sweatpants, laid on his bed, and waited.

It took forever to hear the signaling snore from Luke, but once it finally pierced the darkness, he was moving, hands reaching out, body shifting closer, palms light against the figure of her. She didn't fight him as he rolled her to face

him, and his heart dropped as he recognized the lines of tears streaked down her face.

*No, baby, no.*

He reached up, caressing his thumb on her cheek and catching a single tear as it fell. He looked at her, and for a countless length of time, they just stared at each other. Her embarrassment evident, his silent insistence it was nothing, nothing she should ever be embarrassed about. The tears continued to fall, and the only other thing he could think to do was wrap her in his arms and hold her through it. He shifted, folding her into his chest, and holding her tightly.

He didn't know how long they laid there, he only knew it had to be the worst thing he'd ever experienced. If he never saw her cry again, he'd be more than happy. It was worse than watching Will Smith cry. Like watching the scene in *I Am Legend* where he had to put the dog down on repeat for hours.

Harry Potter didn't sacrifice himself at the Battle of Hogwarts for people like Penny Foster to feel inadequate.

Alex kissed her brow, he threaded his fingers through hers, brought them up to press kisses to her knuckles, to the center of her palms. When she finally pulled away from him with a sniffle, his hand fitted against her neck. He traced his thumb along the length of her jaw as he silently mouthed, "Are you okay?"

She nodded, a small up and down movement of her head before she pushed herself into a seated position. The sound of Penny opening up her package of baby wipes and wiping her face caused Luke to snuffle in his sleep. Just enough to cause a moment's stagnation in the rhythm of his snores.

Alex internally stewed.

Let Luke wake up. Let him see the emotional figure of his best friend picking herself up from the fractures of her happy disposition. Let him wake up and see exactly the way she was. Let him focus, realize, and put into perspective what he had become blind to. If he'd even been blind to it.

Had Luke known about this the entire time? Had he known and done nothing?

Most of all, Alex just wanted to know why?

He knew if he were in her place, he would not have been able to shoulder the strain she endured in her day to day life with even a fraction of her grace. He would have gone ballistic by now, a Hiroshima-level nuclear explosion that would vaporize every relationship within a thirty-mile radius. Tiny scars were nothing compared to what she had to deal with, at least the things he knew about. His mind went back to all the things Luke had told him over the years. All of the horror stories about her mother and her siblings. The scars littering her palms were as beautiful as the curves of her face. It was a testament to her character she would shoulder her pain, quietly, stoically, with a kind, unburdened smile on her face.

He felt honored to see this side of her. To be able to comfort her through it. But he was also horrified someone like him, someone who was socially inept at the best of times, was the one to notice. Because if Luke knew and did nothing, Alex would punch him in the fucking face.

After she was done, she shuffled back down into the circle of his arms, hugging herself to his chest. They lay there, each on their side, her head resting on his bicep as he'd resumed the soothing strokes along her back, through her unbound hair. His gaze danced along her face, relieved that the sadness had dissipated.

Her forest green eyes looked a muted hazel in the dim light. They searched his, long and probing. Whatever she was looking for, she must have found it. A flash sparked around her irises, and she moved her hand up slowly. Light currents of fire ignited from her touch. She leaned forward the mere inches separating them and pressed her lips to his.

He blacked out.

When he finally came back to himself, by some miracle, she was still there. Their lips were moving softly along each

other's—a never-ending cascade of slow, tender kisses. No teeth. No tongue. Just the blissful glide of flesh on flesh. It never ceased. Never intensified. They just continued kissing as if it were as necessary as breathing. Each other's hands cupping the other's face. Learning, reveling, worshipping. Again and again.

His head grew fuzzy from the feeling of her hands, her lips, and the taste of her on his tongue. In any world, in any existence, he'd thought might be out there, if there were one where he'd be allowed to kiss Penny, all of them would pale in comparison to this. Right now, right here, with her.

They kissed for minutes that felt like hours. They kissed until he fell asleep. His lips pressed to hers.

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When he woke, there was a chill to the air. He grappled for the blankets, pulling them over his shoulder and reaching out for the comforting warmth of Penny. His hand met nothing, which meant it must be morning. Except, he could still hear the raucous snores coming from behind him, which meant Luke was still asleep, and that couldn't be right. He peaked open a single eye.

Instead of the offending glow he was usually greeted with, there was a hazy grey light filtering through the tent. He turned, squinting at the snoring figure of Luke, sprawled on his back, the pillow scrunched underneath his neck.

Was this the twilight zone? What god awful time was it?

He supposed the only way for him to find out was to actually get up. He didn't bother with his pants, choosing instead to put on one of his thermal Henley's and stuff his feet into some socks, then his boots. As quietly as he could, which wasn't quiet at all because of who he was, he tripped his way out of the tent. The sky was painted against the hazy grey, warm streaks of orange and pink. It was the telltale picture of sunrise, and other than their trip up this

blasted mountain, he'd never woken up this early. He'd stayed up until then, but not ever, one time in his life, had he willingly woken up to see it. Only psychopaths and serial killers did that sort of thing.

He allowed himself to grudgingly admire the skyline. Away from the city and the noise, the sunrise looked like something from the movies, or in photographs of far off places he'd probably never get the chance to see. He tore his gaze away from the picturesque landscape to search the camp, and settled on the only thing more captivating than the rising sun.

Penny sat at the picnic table, pouring water into a pot. She didn't look up at him at first, not until she registered the figure that had emerged from the tent wasn't moving. When she did look up and saw who he was, her brows rose in surprise. "Oh my god. You're up early."

He ran a hand over his face, scrunching it as he considered the time, the day, the universe he was currently occupying. "I need you to be honest with me." She arched one eyebrow at him. "Am I dead?"

She chuckled, rolling her eyes and fixing her attention back to carefully pouring water into the small pot in front of her. Suddenly, looking at her carefree face in the early morning light, everything came back to him. The revelations, the response, the kiss.

Holy shit he'd kissed Penny. He'd kissed her a lot. He'd kissed her so much he could still feel the press of her lips against his, still taste the honey of her on the tip of his tongue. More than that, he'd seen a piece of her he was certain very few—if any—had before. Even if she looked more relaxed today, he didn't want to forget it; he didn't want to dance around and pretend it never happened. She deserved more than that.

Slowly, he walked over to her, sitting down directly next to her on the bench, his thigh a mere inch from her own. She looked up at him for a moment, her eyes questioning, before

her attention was once again claimed by the pot. When it was arguably full, she put it on the worn metal grate over the freshly wooded fire, twisting the cap onto the reserve of water and setting it to the side.

She turned, only slightly in her seat, her knees angling toward him, brushing against the fabric of his sweats. Her touch, the smallest press of knee to knee was all he needed. He reached forward, taking her hands lightly in his own, pulling them face up onto his lap. They were loose, lax, and he saw the red blemishes stretched along the length of alabaster skin. He sighed, letting his thumbs run along the ridges. "Will you tell me about it?"

"There's really not much to tell," she murmured, her eyes not meeting his.

"Of course there is, Penny."

This time it was her who took the audible gulp of breath, her eyes flicked to his before they fixed on their clasped hands. "Sometimes things just get hard."

He knew that; he could understand that. He wanted to know more. He wanted to help. Even if it was just this, this moment in the woods. He wanted her to know after all of this was over, he cared. That he would always care. "How?"

She shook her head. "It's like sometimes, things just get loud in my head, and the only way to get it to quiet down is to ..." She didn't elaborate, simply curled her hands into fists over his thumbs, demonstrating exactly what she felt—what she did. Without another thought, he brought their clasped hands to his mouth, pressing a kiss to one then the other. Her fingers loosened against his mouth, and he breathed a small sigh of relief as they dropped back down to his lap.

"When did it start?" he asked, leaning down a little to catch her gaze.

He hated the shame on her face, the sadness, but he waited. He waited for her to answer, to tell him her story. "When I was fourteen. I got a D on one of my papers and my mom freaked out. Grounded me, banned me from anything



that wasn't schoolwork or chores. I just ... couldn't handle it. I guess, it just never stopped. It doesn't happen all the time, I go months sometimes without doing it, but then something will happen and things will get to be too much, and I don't even realize what I've done."

He leaned in, just an inch, a tiny inch. Bringing her closer to him, feeling her warmth, hoping to soothe her with his. "You do so much for everyone."

"It's not that. It's not ever just one thing. It's ..."

*Everything.* He knew what she meant without her having to say it. He thought about his life, his childhood, and how even years later he still felt the tendrils of fear. Fear of what he didn't know. He didn't have anything to fear anymore, his dad was in jail and he was far, far away from Toledo, but sometimes it would hit him. She didn't need to explain why or how if she didn't want to. He got it.

"I think it's part of it," he said, giving her hands a little squeeze. "You take care of everyone, Penny. Who takes care of you?"

A shy, adorable smile quirked on her lips and he couldn't help but smile in return. Her lashes fluttered, and as she spoke, she peeked up at him, her green eyes nearly Kelly in the brilliant reflection of the rising sun. "I know a guy who helped with the dishes once."

He grinned, his eyes crinkling as he looked down at her. "People don't deserve your kindness. Your goodness."

Penny gave a little laugh, a pretty flush staining her cheeks. "You make me sound like a saint."

"Wait, you're not? What am I doing here?" he quipped, his voice laced with his signature sarcasm. *Inappropriate humor, glad you could make an appearance.* Where was Luke's knife? He should probably just impale himself on it now.

She huffed, rolling her eyes, extracting one of her hands and giving his shoulder a light shove. "You're such a drama queen."

*Queen? I think not ... He was definitely more of ...* But his thoughts were derailed when her hand immediately went back and laced with his. He'd never been much for hand-holding. He was anxious by nature, perpetually nervous some might even say. More often than not, his hands would sweat, and grabbing onto someone with a sweaty hand was in no way a turn on for either person involved. With Penny ... well, he could get used to holding hands with her.

He adjusted his other hand, moving so both of their fingers were linked tightly together. "Have you ever talked to anybody about it?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "I see a therapist once a month."

Good. *Good*. At least she had someone to talk to, even if it was someone who didn't know or care about her the way they should. "Does it help?"

"Sometimes. Other times nothing helps."

Suddenly, a grisly realization dawned. With everything, with his inner monologue running on overdrive since yesterday, in his methodical dissection of the situation, the reasoning behind it, he had to know, he had to ask. "Have ... have you ever done this because of me?" Her lashes lowered, her body went stiff, her fingers tightened just a fraction against his own. He knew. He knew what the answer was. "Fuck."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't really you, it was ..." she whispered, and the sadness, the underlying despair in her tone made him want to throw himself off the closest cliff. He was sure he'd be able to find one. They were on top of a goddamn mountain after all.

He reached out for her cheek, bringing her face back to him, her shadowed eyes laced with shame. "Hey. No. You don't have to explain if you don't want to. You don't have to placate others for their infractions. I don't want ..." He licked his lips, trying to figure out something else to say, something so she could understand how he felt. "Don't be sorry. Not for this. I'm sorry. We should be sorry. That you felt

like you had to do this alone. That you felt like we wouldn't understand."

He tried to tell her, with the force of his gaze, the trembling of his hands, he meant it. That whatever he had done, whatever asshole thing he'd done to make her do this, he'd never do it again. Not as long as he breathed. "Does anyone else know?"

"My parents and now you. You're kind of the first person who's noticed."

He thought he had overcome the anger portion of this story. He was wrong. It welled up anew, hot, dark, overpowering. "I'm going to fucking kill Luke."

She bounced a little, her body turning even farther toward him. "No, please. I don't want him to think less of me. I don't want him to know. I didn't want anyone to know."

She looked so sincere, slightly ashamed. And he couldn't bear it. He brought unsteady fingers up to her face, to thread along the column of her neck. "Anyone who thinks you aren't the most incredible person on the face of the planet doesn't deserve your time." He kept his right hand along her jaw, but his left dropped back down to her hand, squeezing it with his own. "This is a part of you. It might not be the part you show to everyone, it might not be the part you're proud of, but it's you, and you ... are beautiful. Even this."

A small little gust of breath escaped her, and she dropped her gaze from his. He tried to bring it back with a press of his thumb against her jaw, but it stayed fixed on their hands. Finally, after a long moment of silence, she mumbled, "I think that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"I have some serious questions I need to ask myself if that's true."

She smiled, a beautiful, beaming smile—one that eclipsed the yellow orb slowly rising over her right shoulder. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything quite as

magnificent as the sheer force of Penny Foster's smile. "Thank you."

"Anytime." And he meant it, with every fiber of his being. "I know we aren't particularly close, but if you ever need anything, even just to talk, I'm here."

She scoffed, tugging on the sleeve of his Henley. "Alex, I've known you for seven years. Of course, we're close."

He thought maybe his heart had stopped beating. Did she really think they were close? Had he been wrong all this time? He thought they were just two people frequenting the same friend space. That her pretty smiles and her endless optimism were extended to everyone. Had they really been friends all these years? Like friend, friends? Why hadn't someone told him? If he knew they'd been friends this whole time, he would have ... he would have ... what would he have done? Would it have changed things? He wanted to say of course it would. If he knew Penny considered him a friend, he would have actually tried to act like one over the last seven years.

His eyes were bouncing back and forth in rapid-fire. "I guess I didn't realize."

"Or you didn't want to realize, because you equate friendship with abandonment." His eyes flew to hers, his brow crinkling. Her statement had hit him as if she'd kicked him square in the stomach, and it was all he could do not to get up and high-knee it into the woods to get away from it. Her expression turned sheepish. "Sorry, years of therapy. Things just come out sometimes. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

He blew out a shaky breath. "No, no. It's just... never mind. In the meantime, if I ever make you want to do this again, you have my full permission to punch me square in the dick. No questions asked." She laughed, in earnest this time, and he couldn't help the answering smile that broke across his face. He stroked his hand along her jaw, eyes fixed on the curve of her lips. "That's better."

This time, he was the one to lean in, to press his lips to hers. He'd done it without thinking and instantly thought he'd made a colossal fucking mistake. That he'd overstepped the bounds of their covert snuggling arrangement, dragging it out into the light of day; but all concerns were soundly put to rest when her lips pressed back against his. She snaked her hands up, over his shoulders, into his hair, pulling him closer.

It started small, with the same tender kisses from last night, until she groaned, her mouth opening, the tip of her tongue licking over the seam of his lips. What started as a reverent worship quickly turned into a full-on make-out session. His tongue was tangling with hers, his hands twisted in her hair, at her waist, pulling her closer, grappling for her. It went on. Long. Longer. He was fairly certain he'd stopped breathing but decided he didn't need to anyway. He'd rather pass out than break the kiss with Penny. Pass out, be hospitalized, die—all things preferable to the prospect of not being in that moment.

From next to them, they heard the hiss of water splashing against flame and they broke apart. The sight of her, with her cheeks flushed, her lips swollen, and her eyes dark with desire would definitely go in his list of "Top Ten Best Penny Foster Looks." He hadn't populated a list yet, but he damn sure would make it a priority. She gave him a small smile before she grabbed one of the oven mitts off the table and carefully maneuvered the boiling pot from the fire.

She went from overachieving kissing technique to domesticity with a shocking lack of rebound time. While he couldn't even comprehend where and what he was currently sitting on, let alone that things needed to be done. *Shit. Shit. That was ...*

That was electric, thought-robbing, mind-altering, the reason cults existed. Could this be an elaborate ruse in order to convert him to a cult that's focus was an enthusiasm for the outdoors and an optimistic outlook? With Penny as the

leader, probably. Would he submit willingly? If her lips were involved, fuck yeah, he would.

She broke across his internal tangent with a happy smile as she plunked a gorgeous cup of steaming, black coffee down next to him. "Coffee."

He sighed happily, letting a little laugh escape him as he dropped both of his elbows on the table to cup the mug between his hands. "You know, I think you're kind of wonderful."

She flushed again, and he made it a point to start another list regarding the number of times he'd made her blush.

"You are a total cheeseball," she said, shuffling over and sitting back down next to him on the bench, thigh against thigh.

"I guess I am." Then he leaned forward, cup of coffee in his hands, and Penny Foster against his mouth, and if that didn't have the makings of a perfect day, then he in no way knew what the meaning of the word was.

They broke apart, noses threaded together. Alex's gaze bounced from the pretty moss of her eyes down to the lush fullness of her mouth when she murmured, "Luke will be awake soon."

"Good for him."

Her legs moved, folding up so she was sitting crisscross at the picnic table, facing toward him while he faced toward the lake. He hooked his hands into her knees, pulling her until the cross of her ankles hit his hip. She slid forward easily, and she giggled a little as she leaned into him. "You know, everyone thinks you're all broody and mysterious, but I have news for them, you're kind of sweet."

He shot her a mockingly offended expression. "Keep that to yourself, will you? I've got a rep to protect."

They were both chuckling as his mouth claimed hers and forgot all about their sleeping friend.



## Chapter 7

Alex had a new favorite game.

It was called “How many times can I secretly kiss Penny without getting caught?” Thus far, the answer was four times, and he found that number nowhere near sufficient. He was dying to get to five. He'd had his eyes laser-focused on her mouth nearly all day. He couldn't remember if they'd been talking. He couldn't remember anything other than her lips were moving, and he wanted them pressed to his.

Did he learn something today? The fuck if he knew.

It was an elegant game of misdirection. When there was even a modicum of privacy, he'd lunge forward and press his mouth to hers in a series of quick pecks. She would smile, blush, and tug on the end of her ponytail, and all it did was make him want to kiss her all over again. He would forever be indebted to Luke for his inability to read a situation because, not that Alex thought he was particularly cunning when it came to stealth ... but even *he* thought it was pretty obvious what was going on.

First of all, the woman could kiss. She tasted like the things he liked, but rather than compiling a large laundry list of different food products, he'd wrap them all up in a colloquial “her” and be done with it. He didn't think anything could be sweeter than their kisses last night, and then she opened her mouth, his tongue met hers, and he realized he was wrong. Dead wrong.

He needed no comparative study to support his thesis. The only thing he needed was in-depth interviews with every other man she'd ever kissed to ask them how stupid they were to ever consider kissing anyone else. He honestly needed to know, because the first time his lips met Penny's, he wanted to draft a petition to allow himself to continue



doing that for the rest of his life. Which could be loosely considered a declaration of marriage, but he'd ignore the technicality. He'd blame his subconscious proposal on the endorphins currently ziplining through his bloodstream brought on by the woman in question's extremely talented mouth.

He was equally horrified and fascinated by the mental state of these phantom "other men." They were morons! He didn't think anyone could ever be stupid enough to let someone like her go, but here he was, with his mouth on hers and his hands learning the curves of her body, which basically proved the education system in America was woefully lacking. He definitely wouldn't complain. Shake these "other men's" hands maybe, but complain he would not.

He could kiss her for hours. Longer than. He could kiss her constantly for the next six days and not even be fatigued. He hadn't expected it to be like this—with her. Sure, he'd thought about it. Look at her, she was the perfect embodiment of his wildest fantasy: smart, funny, deep, with good taste in films, and a mouth that could make the devil repent. Of course, he thought about what it would be like to kiss her, but even his most detailed fantasies were nowhere near sufficient. He, Alexander Jones, published author, "eloquently verbose" as the *Boston Globe* had said, couldn't have imagined a kiss like hers. It went to his head. He went from a painstakingly composed symphony to a one-track pop single, which was nothing but her. Penny.

He managed to snag another opportunity to kiss her right after dinner, when she was going to take a walk and he'd planned on taking another frigid lake bath. He was at the clothesline, where their three towels were all hanging in sheets. She was walking by him as he tested the fabric for dampness, and he snagged her hand, pulling her back behind one of the towels and pressed his lips to hers. She smiled against his lips as she pulled away. She shot him a

fond look, rubbing her thumb up his jaw before heading toward the woods. He waited until she was at the edge of the forest to rip the towel in front of him down, bringing both the camp and his best friend into view.

“Yo, Luke. We swimming or what?”

Luke seemed startled by Alex’s question, turning from his crouched position by the fire and raising his eyebrows at him. The redhead shrugged as he stood. Alex ripped down another towel and tossed it at his friend. He was glad to see it got close enough, Luke’s football reflexes were able to snatch it out of midair. With an amused expression, and a few unathletic jokes lobbed his way, they walked down to the lake.

“You’re in a good mood. Like an insanely good mood. It’s kind of terrifying.”

Alex shot his friend a lopsided grin. Was he in a good mood? He shrugged, answering his own question. “I guess I am. The woods are getting to me, man; it’s all this air.” He motioned widely to the landscape around him, and his jerky movements made his friend laugh.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were starting to like it out here.”

He felt heat rise on his cheeks, and he bowed his head down a little. “Eh, I guess it grows on you.”

“That’s killer! Maybe we can make this an annual thing.” Alex’s brows rocketed upward as he fixed Luke with a horrified look. Luke chuckled. “All right, all right.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, champ.” Look at him, using the friendly neighborly insults. Maybe he was getting the hang of the outdoors after all. Pretty soon he’d be wearing cargo shorts and skinning rabbits.

Actually, no, there would never be a world where he willingly skinned the rabbit. Not this world, not the next. He’d eat the stinging nettles first. He would boil them the fuck up.

“Yeah, well, maybe we can find something in between the woods and the city.”

“Like what, a highly overrated music festival with bohemian allegory?”

He nearly gagged as hard as when he thought about the rabbit. “I wouldn’t go to Coachella if you fucking paid me.”

First of all, crowds. Second of all, shitty music. Third of all, cultural appropriation to levels that made him physically ill. Hard pass.

“Ready?” Luke quipped, shoving Alex’s shoulder roughly. He stumbled to the side before correcting and sidling up to the edge of the lake. Alex pulled his shirt over his head, toeing off his boots and then snagging his hat. Luke followed suit, shimmying out of his pants, then his shirt.

With a grin, Alex nodded. Then they both took off, running into the water. He was happy to report the water had warmed up a degree or two since the last icy escapade, but he still felt some serious shrinkage downstairs.

He came up a mess of limbs, sputtering from the water shooting up his nose. He shook his head, trying desperately to dislodge it. Instead he was met with a heavy splash, robbing him of breath and vision. He swiped his hand across his face, fixing Luke with an offended glare. The redhead had the audacity to grin. Which prompted a battle royal of dunking, splashing, and careful evasion.

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That night, much to Alex's dismay, they all went to bed together. He'd hoped for another early Penny night, a night where she'd disappear, and this time he'd feign exhaustion and join her so he'd be able to have a few, uninterrupted minutes alone with her, or more specifically, alone with her lips. It wasn't to be, because when Penny declared she was going to bed, Luke immediately stated the same, so begrudgingly he followed suit.

As the boys changed into their sleep clothes outside of the tent, Penny was inside. He tried not to think of her. He tried not to think of her when they finally entered the tent and she was burrowed under her own covers, her back to them. He continued his fruitless task when he was waiting for Luke to fall asleep. Except he wasn't really trying at all. She was all he could think about, and as ridiculous as that sounded, he could feel the twitch of his fingers as time passed.

What seemed like fourteen years later, he finally heard Luke's ungraceful snore. It took only another second before he felt the lithe frame of Penny squeeze in next to him. He rolled to her, bringing her body into his, his lips finding hers immediately.

It was amazing how well they lined up. How he could move forward blindly and be able to fit his lips perfectly against hers. Although he would have liked to, he couldn't chalk any of that up to himself. It had to be all Penny. Another perk of her witchcraft. Coffee manifestation, fluffy egg creation, and kiss aficionado.

They kissed for a long time, with teeth and tongue. Chest to chest, hands lightly skating along arms, backs, over shoulders, into hair. Then, in an act of boldness, he felt the light pressure of her hand slide up from its place on his bicep, onto his chest, down, teasing along his lower stomach.

He was about to fucking embarrass himself.

He kept his hips far enough away from her so she wouldn't know how completely "excited" he was by the new development. His hands had been glued to her lower back and her cheek, and at the tentative pace of her exploration, he slowly followed suit, moving his hands along her body. She nodded into their kiss as he traced a line over the curve of her breasts, fingers dancing against the sensitive skin of her waist exposed by her raised tank top. Over her hip.

She flicked her tongue against his and he swore he blacked out. His hands manifested minds of their own as one yanked her fully against him and the other moved to cup her ass, kneading it roughly.

*Spoiler alert: It felt just as glorious as it looked.*

Dear god, where had she been hiding this thing?

She rolled her body against the ridge of his erection at the same time she bit his lower lip, giving it a sharp tug. A small groan escaped him, filtered into the still night, and they both froze. Panting slightly, cheeks flushed.

He couldn't stop his eyes' path from her heavy-lidded gaze to the swollen plushness of her mouth. They stayed there, pressed together, ears settled on Luke's snores. He removed his hand from her backside, bringing it back up to her face, letting his thumb trail along the slope of her jaw. She smiled at him, just a little, before moving back in. In a shocking display of strength, one he didn't think he was capable of; he averted his mouth.

Her brow furrowed. He blew out a quiet, shallow breath before knocking his head to the side, to indicate, as much as he wished they were alone, and dear god did he wish it, they very much weren't. She pursed her lips before fluttering her lashes, and he knew he was a goner because this time, when she moved forward, she silently mouthed "slow," and he found himself nodding before his lips met hers again.

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He was slapped awake. Like, legitimately slapped awake. Penny was laying on her back on her section of the bed, and his face was somehow buried under her shoulder, while his arm was settled over her waist. It wasn't necessarily an intimate position, not like some of the other nights they had fallen asleep, but he was still there, touching her.

He grumbled, moving up, trying to orient himself. His eyes met Luke Browning's.

*Oh, well, uh ...* His eyes bounced back to the sleeping figure of Penny, completely oblivious to the fact that he'd been caught with his hands—and body—nearly all over her. He couldn't have kept the sheepish expression off his face if he tried.

"What the fuck, dude?" Luke whispered, furrowing his brow and nodding toward the sleeping girl.

"Sorry," he said quietly following Luke's gaze. "I must have rolled over while I was asleep."

"Well, don't." The neatly offended tone of his friend's voice made his hackles rise. "You're lucky I woke up before she did. She'd kill you."

He didn't want to break it to Luke, except, with the inflection in the redhead's voice and the look on his face, Alex absolutely did want to break it to Luke that he had it on fairly good authority she'd do nothing of the sort. He wouldn't, not yet. It was only fifty percent of his place to make such a declaration, and without a conversation with the girl he'd been mauling earlier, he didn't think now was either the time or the circumstance to inform his friend of what was going on.

"Yeah. Thanks, man," he muttered instead.

Luke gave him one more stern look before settling back onto his bed. Alex waited a beat, then two, before he did the same, looking up at the dark lines of the tent. He didn't like the idea of keeping things from Luke, they didn't have that kind of relationship. Luke knew everything about him, the dad thing, the sister thing, why would this be any different?

Alex knew why. It was because it was Penny, and there was the underlying assumption by both Penny and Luke's extended family, they would end up together eventually. More so, Alex had neither an extended family nor the kind of life to offer a girl like her. Was that really the reason why he hadn't told Luke?

Was it because maybe, just maybe, Alex was afraid of what Luke would say? Or was it because he was afraid if he

brought up the idea to Penny, she'd be completely and totally opposed to bringing it into the open. He angled his head, looking at the dim profile of Penny's face resting peacefully on her pillow. Anxiety started to twist at his lungs.

*Jesus, Alexander, it had been negative three days. Couldn't you be like normal guys and just go with the flow instead of overanalyzing every interaction you've ever had with the girl lying next to you?*

Well, historically, the answer to that question was no.

So, he rationalized.

If Penny didn't want to kiss him, he had no doubt she wouldn't have. Not even once, not even in the furthest pity scenario he could construct in his mind would she have done something without fully knowing a) what she was doing, and b) that she wanted to do it.

Luke and he had been friends for years. Penny and Luke had been friends for longer. If, *if*, there was something even remotely romantic between them, it would have come to fruition a long time ago. For the most part, Alex wasn't worried the big reveal would result in some convoluted love triangle. It was the other part. The maintenance of secrecy could hide a lot of things, a lot of ulterior motives he wasn't privy to. This was real life. This wasn't his writing, he didn't know the backstories, the plot points. He didn't know what the twist at the end, the one that would leave everyone reeling, would be, and the lack of knowledge was terrifying.

Lastly, before he decided the world was crashing down around him and Penny was most definitely keeping him a secret for reasons known only to her, he should probably answer some very important questions of his own.

*List of questions Alexander Jonathon Jones needed to answer before talking to Penny about what this was:*

- 1. What did he want this to be?*
- 2. Where did he want this to go?*

### *3. Did he even want Luke to know?*

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The waking up early thing thankfully seemed to be a one-time occurrence.

He woke up at the jolly old time of ... last.

The light was bright outside of the panels of the tent, and he was all alone. If he strained his ears, he could just make out the sound of Penny and Luke talking outside. He lay there, letting the quiet—interrupted only by the dull murmur of voices in the distance—seep into him. Which was fine because it gave him a little time to consider his situation and think about the questions he had asked himself last night.

Out of the multitude of scenarios, pros and cons, he had been able to go over at lightning speed, one thing eclipsed them all. He liked Penny. He really liked her. Even before he'd wound his way around her in the tent. Before they'd gotten into the station wagon with the intention of coming out here for their survival boot camp. He'd liked her for a while now; hell, he wasn't sure he hadn't always kind of liked her, and, because of that, all of the possibilities—the disastrous ends, the potential carnage of implosion—kind of moved to the wayside. He wanted this to be more than just a fling in the woods. He wanted this to last, a long time. Longer than a few months. Maybe even the long run.

Penny was that type of girl. He'd always known that. She wasn't someone you hung around with, wasn't someone you dated casually, or the type you fucked when you had the inkling. She was a once-in-a-lifetime type of girl. Alex may be many things (clueless, socially inept, overdramatic—just to name a few), but he was not an idiot; and only an idiot would let a girl like Penny Foster slip away.

Case and point ... the dipshit she dated in college. What was his name? Trinity ... Travis ... TREVOR! Alex was pretty



sure his name was Trevor.

He was surprised he was able to answer questions one and two so quickly, that left one glaring bullet point that needed to be addressed. Did he want Luke to know?

The answer to all of his questions came easily, and it was terrifying. Yes, he wanted Luke to know. Yes, he wanted to tell him. So that left ... a conversation. With Penny. About feelings. Which was enough to make him physically ill.

Alex was lucky thus far he'd never had to break up with someone (he'd never really had to; girls were quick to break up with him first). He wondered now if it would be inappropriate to call one of them and ask them how they did it, because meaningful conversations about important things had never been his strong suit. At least when it came to how he felt. Perhaps he was getting better at it? He'd been able to muscle his way through his conversation with Penny yesterday with relatively no foot-in-mouth scenarios.

Could he write out what he wanted to say beforehand? He had always been better at channeling his emotions through words. He could see himself now, fumbling with a torn piece of paper, rotating it because it was inexplicably upside down, clearing his throat, tugging at his hair, clearing his throat again.

*Here, Penny, sit down, would you? \*Cough, cough\* (produces note). Hello, we are gathered here today because the two of us have entered into what could be loosely identified at this time as a relationship, and I propose we clarify the terms of such so we might pursue it further.*

He cringed as he internally vetoed the idea. An overly thesaurized soliloquy carefully edited to get his message out would make him the most awkward bloke this side of wherever Michael Cera lived. He was going to have to bite the bullet and get her alone, and that was all there was to it.

Alex sighed while he finished getting dressed. He needed to know what time it was, which required going outside to face the incredible woman he had terrifyingly legitimate

feelings for, and his best friend who knew, at the very least, he had caught them snuggling last night. They were all friends (he knew that now), so it shouldn't be awkward, or it shouldn't have been, until he unzipped the tent and he realized he was going to have to do much more than bite the proverbial bullet. He was going to be biting the literal one, as well.

He went from mildly awake and staggering into daylight to hitting the deck in seconds.

Penny had a gun. A big gun. The kind of gun that could take out elephants. What in the fuckity fuck-fuck, fucking-fuck was going on here?

Luke and Penny paused, staring at Alex who was now laying wide-eyed on the ground. Luke looked as if he was going to cry from laughter, and Penny was trying to hide her smile. From Alex's current position, he could see the gun wasn't really all that big, and Penny was most decidedly pointing it away from everyone, angled downward. Still, he had better stay on the ground, just in case. At least until he figured out what was going on.

"Why do you have a gun?" he said as calmly as possible. As calmly as possible with a crack in his voice after throwing himself to the ground in an attempt at cover.

*Spoiler alert: He did not sound calm at all.*

She was checking a slide, moving it in and out of place. "I'm making sure it's functioning properly."

That was all well and good, but ... "I repeat, why do you have a gun?"

"Because you're going to learn to shoot one today," Luke supplemented.

"The fuck I am." Alex pushed himself into a seated position, hands hanging loosely between his legs, eyeing the two people sitting at the picnic table with obvious trepidation. "I'm a conscientious objector. I don't do guns."

"It's a hunting rifle. Have you ever shot one?"

“N-n-no!” he sputtered at the amused ginger spawn of Satan.

Penny pursed her lips, shooting Luke—who wasn’t even trying to hide his amusement anymore—a warning look. “You don't have to shoot if you don't want to, but I figured you'd want to see someone shoot at a target. One of the first things someone will associate with a character classified as ex-military would be their knowledge of firearms.”

This woman and her ability to string together an argument. She'd be the death of him. The literal death of him by the looks of the gun in her hands. He moved to his feet cautiously, and she, seemingly satisfied with the weapon in her hands, placed the gun back into a soft case.

“Is it safe?”

She paused lightly, inspecting his features as he made a winding path around the gun. “It's not loaded. Yes, it's safe.” Alex shuffled forward cautiously, and seeing his hesitance, Penny handed the gun to Luke, keeping it on the opposite side of her body than where he was standing. Luke took the case toward a set of packs sitting by the tree line, leaning it against one of the trees. “I’m sorry I didn't know you were so averse to guns. We don’t have to shoot today.”

“I grew up around a lot of guns. Wasn’t the greatest experience.”

“Really, we don’t have to go out if you don’t want. I made a ton of notes in your book on what I know, and some other research I’d done on long-distance rifles. I just assumed ...” She trailed off, looking sheepish, as if she hadn't simply made clear connections between the things he'd given her (a.k.a. the premise of his book) and what he might need to know. She looked guilty, as though she’d intentionally done something wrong. Which she absolutely had not.

Penny and Luke were hardly the Bloodhounds. The possession of the rifle wasn’t an admission they were gang-affiliated. They weren’t that kind of people. They were the kind of people who took ten days of vacation away from

work to help him write a book. Alex understood when it came to friends, he was beyond undeserving of them. If Penny and Luke had taken the time to draft up instructions on something he disliked as much as guns, he owed it to them to at least listen.

“Let’s start small. Yeah? Where did you even get it?”

“It’s Frank’s. He makes us take it with us when we’re out here. Just in case. We’ve never had to use it before, and even if we did, it wouldn’t do much damage; it’s just a 22.”

That made sense. Luke’s father, Frank, was old school. From the tips of his graying hair to the worn soles of his work boots. Alex could see Frank insisting two young kids going out into the middle of nowhere have something to protect themselves.

“Right,” he muttered, tugging at the edges of his sleeves.

Penny already knew how to completely redirect his mood swings. “Coffee?”

Alex hummed. “Yes, please.” He reached out for the steaming cup she was offering him. Then she produced another glorious foil-covered plate of breakfast and he couldn’t think of a single negative thing to say about the morning thus far—gun included.

With Alex eating his breakfast, Luke was left to run down to the lake to get buckets of water to do the morning dishes. With the redhead occupied, Penny leaned in and pressed a light peck to the side of Alex’s mouth. He had been distracted by the mountain of food he was devouring, but once he felt her soft lips against his skin, he looked up at her, fork hanging in midair.

“I’m really sorry; I didn’t know,” she whispered, nodding over to the packs waiting for them patiently. He grabbed her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, only because he was sure Luke would definitely notice if he stood up, leaned her backward, and snogged the ever-loving daylights out of her. “You can’t know something I didn’t tell you. It’s okay.” She

frowned, and he felt himself continue, "And you're right. I should at least go over the basics. It wouldn't hurt to watch."

Her frown grew even deeper, her brow furrowing into an adorable little V above the gentle slope of her nose. He wanted to reach out and smooth it with his fingertips. "Are you sure? I don't want you to do anything you aren't comfortable with."

"I'm sure. I trust you."

She flushed, and he felt his heart shoot straight out of the top of his head. She was so pretty when she blushed, with her dark lashes and her haunting green eyes. Screw it, he was going to kiss her ...

Luke smacked the buckets onto the table, effectively shattering the moment and pulling both of their attention to him. Alex could barely see the water sloshing in the bucket from where he was sitting, but he knew it was more than enough for breakfast and maybe even the dishes from lunch, as well. He stabbed his fork into a bite of eggs, bringing it to his mouth as Luke fixed him with an inquiring look. "Done with your freak-out?"

Luke knew him well enough to know most of the time, when Alex short-circuited, he needed a little bit of time to process in order to come back down. Once he was able to think things through, he was fine, but getting caught off guard—especially after having a childhood where surprises were never, ever good things—tended to send him over the deep end. He gave Luke a thumbs-up, motioning toward the nearly empty plate and his cup of coffee.

"There's coffee and breakfast, so I'm going to say yes."

Breakfast, Wi-Fi, Penny. He was a deceptively simple creature to please. Even if he was consistently averaging two out of three.

Luke swung his legs into the picnic table, turning concerned eyes on him. "You sure?"

He reached out, clapping the redhead on the shoulder. "Yeah, man, I'm good."

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They were planning on heading out to the woods after a few hours of mucking about. Penny was doing something down by the water, and Luke was tossing around a baseball. Where or why he had a baseball, Alex had no bleeding clue, because not only did Luke not play baseball in either high school or college, but he also hated watching it.

“Oi, bro. I forgot I wanted to ask you something.”

Alex pulled his face out of the notebook. He’d been reading through Penny’s notes, especially the ones on firearms to better prepare himself for their trek. He marveled over her writing. It was cramped, neat, and beautifully laid out. He could imagine she did the same thing when she was researching an article. If the number of notes she’d made for a project she was basically not even involved in were this in-depth, her notebooks for work must be perfectly etched novels.

He eyed Luke, wondering if this was going to have something to do with the not-altogether-innocent situation he had caught them in the night before. “Yeah, *bro*. What’s up?”

Luke rolled his eyes at the overemphasis. “Your agent. What’s up with her?”

Alex’s eyebrows flew into his hairline. Vivian? He was honestly asking about Vivian? “She’s Tony Soprano in Louis Vuitton. Why?”

“What does that mean?” Luke sounded confused, so Alex was going to have to put this in a way that communicated how terrifying that woman actually was. Like the *Purge*, meets *Mean Girls*, meets Whitey Bulger, kind of terrifying.

“She would kill you if your dick got anywhere near anyone else. Ever. She may be connected. I’m not exaggerating. I’m ninety percent certain she’s had someone killed before.”

His words didn't seem to have any effect on Luke. With an unaffected expression, he asked, "But is she single?"

Alex rolled his eyes. Leave it to Luke to completely miss the point. Sure, he could argue Vivian was pretty. He had eyes. She had the dark, striking features that could draw someone in; but she also had the are-her-nails-painted-black-to-hide-the-blood-underneath-them kind of vibe, and *that* was what he was trying to communicate here. "I don't know. She's just my agent. I also like my balls exactly where they are, so I've never asked."

"Would you give her my number?"

Did Alex really want to do that? No. He liked to keep his conversations with Vivian as short as he possibly could. However, his mind couldn't help but turn toward Penny, who he was hoping would want to pursue a relationship, and eventually they'd need to tell Luke. He didn't particularly want to give Luke ammunition for reasonings not to be with someone when he was about to take a step into treacherous territory.

"Sure, man." He shook his head, trying to foresee if Luke's future would end up with him blissfully happy or in a pair of cement shoes at the bottom of the Hudson. "Good luck, you are going to need it."





## Chapter 8

They finally headed out to a place Luke assured them was appropriate for target practice. Penny seemed hesitant as she ambled along next to him, her eyes trained on his face. He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but he didn't know if her discomfort was because of his miniature fit this morning or because they hadn't had an opportunity to really talk at all about what happened last night. He wanted to fold her into his arms. Not for her, but for himself. He wanted the comfort of her body because she was soft and warm, and when he held her he thought of nothing else.

When he held her in his arms, he didn't have to think about what their relationship meant and what Luke would say. It was like the noise in his head, the near-constant stream of consciousness, went quiet, and he liked that, a lot.

Luke, with his mega-nuclear legs, was powering on in front of them. He had the gun and his pack strapped to his back and was bounding through the woods. Alex was exhausted just watching. Luke's position in the lead did offer a unique opportunity. Alex threaded his hand with Penny's, giving her fingers a light squeeze. They walked for a little while, holding hands before the exercise caused his palms to sweat and he pulled it away, rubbing the skin along the fabric of his shirt. Penny smiled, crinkling her nose, and did the same.

When they finally arrived at the target area, he realized they weren't all that far from where they had built the shelter a few days earlier. He was somewhere between excited and disappointed he was starting to get acclimated to navigating his way through the woods. He might even be bold enough to say he could get there without either Luke or Penny, but maybe it was just because he'd been to this area.

He watched the scene, taking into account the tree line and the twitter of birds in the distance as his friend carefully set up a series of cans and bottles onto a fallen log a short way into the distance. The entire time the gun stayed firmly in its case. At least until Luke returned to their side, giving both Penny and him a lopsided grin and asking, "You ready?" Alex took an unsteady breath and shrugged, motioning for the case. Luke unzipped it, pulling out the gun, angling it down and away from where both Alex and Penny stood. "The first thing I want you to know is that you don't point this thing at anything. Anything at all unless you are intending to pull the trigger, understood?"

"Trust me. That, I'm about."

"This is a .22, a smaller caliber gun. It won't do much damage, either by shot or by recoil, but it's effective for the right purposes. Any weapon is dangerous when used improperly."

He opened the book, making a note about researching calibers on common military weapons before he turned his attention back to where Luke held the gun. He pointed at individual places of the gun, naming as he went. "Butt, stock, safety, trigger, chamber, magazine, sight, barrel, muzzle."

Holy shit, that was a lot. There was no way he was going to remember all of this.

"Wait, wait, wait ..." He bent down, trying and failing to outline a crude drawing of the rifle in Luke's hands. It looked like a jagged worm with a really big head.

This was a terrible idea. A very, very terrible idea.

"Here, let me see if I can make it easier. You call it the butt because you 'butt' it against your shoulder like this." He braced the end of the rifle against his right shoulder, pressing in pretty hard by the looks of it, and steadying the rifle toward the targets. "The safety and trigger are pretty self-explanatory. Red means dead. If the safety switch is red, that means it's live."

“Yeah, I got those ... I’d just ... I’d really like to have it all down.”

Penny rested her hand on his forearm as he continued to scratch against the notebook. “I can help you with it later if you want?” She looked nervous, as if she was hoping to spare him any other discomfort the gun had originally caused him. He was already here, and he was damn sure going to make the most of the situation now.

Luke interjected, “No, he’s right. It’s important to know it beforehand.”

Alex gave her a pointed look and she pursed her lips in displeasure. If Luke wasn’t holding a stick of death in his hand, Alex might even high-five him. It was an automatic reaction, one they’d done countless times over the years. Penny was smarter than both Luke and him combined. So, if there was ever a time they managed to win an argument with her, it was always cause for celebration. Mainly because it rarely—if ever—happened. It was just kind of their thing, and now that he thought about it, even if he wanted to do articulately salacious things to her with increasing intensity, he didn’t think that was going to change.

Alex threw her a teasing grin, and she huffed good-naturedly, shuffling off her pack and dropping it to the ground. He sauntered over to Luke, letting his friend point out and explain each piece of the rifle’s functions as he jotted down notes of where they were and what their purpose was. He even managed to draw one that looked half-way recognizable.

“Obviously, there’s some pretty significant differences when shooting close-range and long-range targets. These ones are pretty close, so you won’t have to do much calculation. Simply center the scope on what you are trying to hit and pull the trigger.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a little cross in the center of the scope. You center the target on that before you fire. Here ...”

For an insane second, he thought Luke was going to hand the gun over to him. He dropped back, as if a hole had opened up in the ground and was trying to swallow him where he stood. He wasn't nearly as uncomfortable around it anymore, but he didn't think he was up to holding it quite yet. Give him another couple minutes, man. Except Luke didn't hand the gun to him at all; in fact, he handed it directly to Penny, who set her feet, one angled slightly before the other, in a solid stance.

Penny with a gun. He wasn't sure if he should be scared or aroused. He was both. It shouldn't be both, but it was definitely both.

"Why did you give the gun to her?" Alex asked around a cough, trying to hide the slight catch to his voice.

Luke simply shrugged, as if the answer was obvious. "She's a better shot."

Penny grinned, and he held firm to his earlier answer: it was definitely both.

"Surprised?" she asked, raising a single eyebrow while throwing him a lethal smirk.

He made a point to sweep his eyes over her entire frame before fixing his gaze back on hers. "When it comes to you? Never."

With a satisfied smile, she fit the rifle hard against her right shoulder, angling her head down so her right eye looked through the scope. With small, calculated adjustments, she aimed as her hand blindly moved, disabling the safety. She squeezed the trigger and a deafening crack shot out, followed by the sound of shattering glass in the distance.

Remind him to never, ever make her mad. Actually, he'd remind himself. He brought the pencil to paper, scratching into the notebook. *Penny can kill you. Don't fuck this up.*

She moved the bolt on the gun, clicking another round into place. She fired another shot, missing. Then another, smacking one of the cans off the fallen tree. They went on

like that for a while, Luke reloading the gun and taking a turn, having considerably less success than Penny had.

They'd been out there for about an hour, and Alex could tell they were getting close to being finished. He shuffled up to Penny. "Can I try?"

Her eyebrows flew into her hairline, her expression deadly serious as she asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I think I need to try it." He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, I swear. Besides, I had a great teacher."

"Luke is actually really good at this."

"I heard that!" the redhead yelled from a few steps away.

Penny rolled her eyes. "You were meant to. It wasn't an insult."

Then, with cautious hands, she set the gun in his grip. She helped him press it into his shoulder, telling him how important it was to hold the rifle hard. She made him look through the scope, so he could see the small cross in the center that was used to aim. He tried not to lean into her touch, but he felt her hands linger on him a little longer than they should have, and it definitely wasn't helping him concentrate.

When he pulled the trigger, he was surprised by the recoil, surprised by the force of it. He didn't come anywhere near hitting anything. Not the first shot. Not the fifth. He would probably never be an expert marksman like his protagonist, but at least now he had some practical experience to apply to Spencer.

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There was a reason he hated guns. Because they gave him a queasy feeling about his childhood? Yes. Because they hurt like a bitch? Also yes.

He had only shot the gun five times and his right shoulder was screaming at him, madly. Why the hell were people obsessed with these things? It made no sense.

He moaned, grabbing his right shoulder with his left hand and rotating the extremity lightly. Penny eyed him across the table. "You okay?"

"Sorer than hell. How are you not?"

She was up in an instant. "Because I've done it before. Here."

She was making her way to him, and he was already trying to get her to stop whatever it was she had planned on doing. "No really ...". But then her hands were on his shoulders and she was kneading roughly into his tight muscles. He lost all train of thought except for the words that spilled out of his mouth.

"Mother fucking son of a bitch, that feels good," he moaned as he let his head drop forward. She moved her hands along his shoulder blade, over to his spine. Her fingers were strong, her moves practiced. His muscles sang at the delicious assault of his flesh being massaged into relaxation. She kept going, and he lost everything but how good it felt to have the tension eased from the tight set of his shoulders.

This woman could be a masseuse. She could be a sharpshooter. She could be a chef. If he ever found something she couldn't do, he honestly wouldn't believe it. Penny Foster for President. *Yes, she can.* She swiped her thumbs deeply along the back of his neck, and he could have sworn his eyes rolled back into his head.

Both hands moved to his right shoulder blade. His muscles stretched in a delicious way that bordered on pain. He could swear he felt his dick twitch. His body lolled in her grip, swaying with the movement of her hands. She worked her thumb over a particularly tender spot, and he sucked in a breath. "Right there, baby," he mumbled, and was rewarded by her digging her thumb back into the spot deeper.

*Motherfucking fuck.*

When the pressure of her fingers finally lightened, dancing softly over the pebbled fabric of his thermal shirt, he brought his hand up to cover hers. He craned his head to look at her, giving her a smile that said both *I appreciate you*, and *I don't deserve you*. "Thank you. That felt incredible. You're an angel."

She smiled, shooting him a quizzical look. "Baby?"

Oh right ... he had let that one slip, hadn't he?

He gave her a sheepish smile, rolling his eyes and shrugging as he released her hand. She moved back toward the other side of the table as he rotated his shoulder experimentally. It was as if he was a completely different person. "Yeah," and even though it was bordering on potentially disastrous conversation territory with Luke a dozen or so feet away, he continued, "Unless you don't like it."

She pressed her teeth into her lower lip, letting her lashes flutter a little, his dick twitched again. "I do, I just never pegged you for a pet name kind of guy."

"I guess there's a first time for everything."

For what seemed like the billionth time, he wanted to drag her into the woods and pull a conversation out of her. Or kiss her senseless. Either way.

"Hmmm ... so tell me, sunshine, what do you say about helping me with dinner?"

He grinned, pressing his finger to his nose before pointing it at her. "Anything for you, baby."

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After dinner, they had kept relatively to themselves. Luke had brought out his guitar, Penny had been sitting crisscrossed on a blanket in front of the fire with a book propped open in her lap, and Alex was sitting at the picnic table, scratching plot points into his notebook. They had been that way for nearly two hours. He was so absorbed in

the chapter he was detailing he didn't realize there was no longer the humming of guitar strings washing over them. Luke was gone, in bed, and he and Penny were left alone in arguably romantic firelight for the first time in what felt like forever.

Where the hell had he been this entire time? In a flash he swung his legs out of the picnic table and made a beeline toward Penny. He was on his knees next to her in less than thirty seconds, burying his face in her neck at thirty-five, and being rewarded with her soft giggle by forty.

She moved her bookmark from its place nestled in between the first page and the front cover to where she had stopped. She closed the book, moving it to the side as she turned her head to press her lips to his. "That took you longer than I thought it would."

"Sorry, I was distracted."

She smiled into his mouth, and he pressed forward farther. Penny curled her fingers into his shirt, leaning back and taking him with her. They sprawled across the blanket, her hair cascading in blonde pools around her head as he angled himself over her. They kissed. Long, dragging kisses and innocent glides of hands along waists and shoulders. Up to trail along the length of her jaw while she dragged her hands down the length of his back. It was all very innocent, except of course there was nothing innocent about it. He pulled away, looking at each of her incomparable features in the dancing glow of the firelight.

"Can I talk to you about something?" he asked. His voice was low, quiet, both because of the circumstantial constraints they were under and the subject matter he intended on addressing.

"Of course." Her eyes roved over his face, as if she were carefully deciphering his expression. "Is it about the gun? I'm sorry ..."

"No. It's not about that." She brought her hand up, tracing the edges of his T-shirt, dancing along the collar.



“What is it?”

He took a heavy inhalation of breath. *Just do it, Alex. Just do it. It's now or never.* “I ... like you.”

She smiled and his heart squeezed painfully in his chest. Somehow, he had just murdered what was supposed to be a nice sentiment, and she was still smiling at him like he'd said something beautiful. “I like you, too.”

“I like you a lot. Which isn't normally a thing for me.” He fought the urge to cringe. This was getting worse and worse. How the hell had he gotten published again? His ineloquence was a mockery of everything he stood for. He should be spitting out sonnets right now. He should be articulating his affection to the tune of Oscar Wilde. Not ... whatever this was.

“Then we're on the same page.”

He felt himself deflate with relief. “I'd like to ... you know.” He needed to slap himself across the face.

Penny, it seemed, didn't find his lack of better descriptors the least bit detrimental to the subject matter. In fact, she looked happy, if not a little amused, as she raised a single brow at him. “Alex Jones, are you asking me out?”

She read him so easily, knew what he was trying to say before even he did. It had never been like this before, not with any girl. He liked to chalk it up to her witchcraft, Lord knows she had to employ some with the miracles she'd performed, but he knew that wasn't it, it was just her.

He gave her a small smile, the tiniest tug of his lips. “Yeah, I think I am.”

“I'd be honored,” she affirmed with a little jiggle of her head. His smile turned into a full-fledged grin, and he leaned forward, capturing her mouth in a kiss. The first one where they were more than just “she” and “he,” but a “them.”

He liked the sound of that.

When they broke apart, he could feel the beginning plumpness of his lips, his breath fanning out as he panted

slightly. He knocked his head toward Luke's snores filtering out of the tent. "Should we tell him?"

Her gaze followed his, settling on the tent. He admired the lines of her profile. "Of course."

"Really?" He tried not to sound too relieved by her answer. He failed.

She brought her face back so she was looking directly up at him, the firelight dancing in her eyes. "Yeah, I don't see why not. He might not be very happy we are all sleeping in the same tent at the moment, but I don't think he'd care."

Right, the tent thing. The whole ... "they were sleeping in one small enclosed area and two of those people were getting increasingly handsy with each other" thing. "Had not considered that."

She hummed and he felt the vibration of it snake through his body. Her eyes were dancing over his face, her hands moving from their place on his chest to settle along the column of his neck. She was certainly looking at him like she liked him. How had he gotten here? How had he possibly gotten this lucky?

Which reminded him. "He, uh, woke up last night."

Her eyes widened as she fixed him with a look that asked if he was being serious. He nodded. "No!"

"Yeah. Slapped the shit out of me."

"Oh, no ..." She moaned morosely, taking her hands from him and covering her face.

Alex chuckled, bringing up his right hand from her waist and pulling hers down so he could look at her. "He was torn between being mad at me and trying to protect me from your wrath."

She sighed heavily, shaking her head a little as she went. "Oh, Luke ..."

"Things I am not particularly fond of hearing when you're underneath me," he deadpanned. She rolled her eyes then swatted him lightly on the shoulder. He faked a wince and

she giggled as she pulled him closer. "So, we're doing this, huh?"

She looked a little shy when she finally responded, "Yeah. When do you want to tell him?"

He blew out a quick burst of air. "I don't know. There's not really a manual on how to tell your best friend you are quasi-dating his other best friend."

"We'll keep it open, wait for when the moment is right. If one doesn't present itself before we go home, we'll tell him then."

Again with her logic. She really was going to be president one day. He'd be a glowing first lady. Well, if she hadn't come to her senses by then.

"Okay."

Then he was kissing her. It was light at first. Sweet. An agreement between the two this was happening, this was real. That they were going to tell Luke.

He suddenly realized they weren't in the tent. They had a modicum of privacy. He didn't have to slow his movements in hopes of not waking up the person next to him. She seemed to realize the same thing because she was pulling him all the way on top of her. He settled himself between her thighs and wound her sinfully long legs around his waist. He ground himself against her, his hips rocking against her center as their lips tangled together.

Alex had one hand fused to her waist, the other hooked into the back of her knee, keeping her wrapped around him. He didn't have to worry, by the desperate path Penny's hands were making down his chest, she wasn't letting him go anywhere. They broke apart, lungs surging, but she didn't let the lack of oxygen from their embrace deter her lips, they skated along the length of his jaw. He angled his head as she sucked the skin of his neck, hard. Hard enough if she kept at it for long, she'd leave a mark. The fuck if he cared. He'd wear it like a badge of honor. He didn't think

he'd had a hickey in ... well ... ever ... and it was weird to want one.

She eased the suction of her lips, instead laving her hot tongue over the sensitive spot. "Fuck, baby," he swore on a groan.

"Shhhhhhhh ..." she shushed, grabbing him by the chin and bringing his mouth down to hers. He went gladly.

"I swear to god if I ever get you out of these fucking woods, you aren't going to be able to shut me up," he mumbled against her mouth.

She let out a giggle, one that was quickly becoming one of his favorite sounds, before asking him a truly tempting question, "Promise?"

He eased his hand under the cotton of her shirt, his body rolling into hers. With the high neck, he wasn't able to pull her shirt down to expose what he was certain was a pair of life-changing breasts. So, he resorted to kneading the mounds through the fabric of her bra. He timed the squeeze of his hands with the stroke of his tongue against hers. She let him caress her for a while, until her hand covered his, pushing it down for a second, then back up. Up the smooth, flat surface of her stomach, underneath the soft cotton of her bra onto the heavy mound of her breast. He breathed out a sigh as his hand met the hard point of her nipple.

Alex cupped her, squeezing lightly, letting his thumb move up to rasp tightly over the hardened nub. His mouth separated from hers just a little. He let his heavy-lidded eyes inspect her flushed face, which was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. He wanted to commit it to memory. He wanted photographs of exactly what she looked like when she was aroused so he would never forget.

He smiled, a small tilt to his lips as his gaze moved from her lips to the long line of her exposed neck, his hand buried under her shirt. He could get used to this. He could more than get used to this.

Her hands explored his body, and it felt like lightning. They petted their way down his back, around his waist, up to tickle the hair on his abdomen underneath his T-shirt. He shivered as her fingers sprung through the coarse hair trailing into the waistband of his jeans. She hooked a finger underneath the fabric. His breath shuddered and he counted backward from ten, losing the ability to work his mouth. A second finger joined the first, and he went completely still.

He didn't want to jinx it—he wanted her to keep going. He wanted her hand wrapped around him; he wanted the soft smallness of her palm encased around his hot heat. What was he, fifteen? Being this fucking hard just from the prospect of a handy was goddamn embarrassing. It was the forbidden eroticism of it. It was the reality that Penny Foster was putting her hand down his pants with their best friend lying in a tent not far away.

She snapped the button of his jeans open. His eyes caught hers, and he could see where she was headed written all over the flush staining her cheeks. With slow calculated movements, she slid her hand down the front of his pants, past his boxers, and palmed him. He buried his face in her neck as her warm, soft skin wrapped around his achingly hard flesh.

His breathing was ragged, and so slowly, it was nearly torture when she began to stroke him. Warm, slow, smooth, and so fucking good. Her boldness encouraged his own. His hand trailed down her chest, over the bumps of each of her ribs, along her abdomen, circling her belly button, dipping a single finger inside until he was trailing calloused pads along the line of her waistband, just as she had done to him. A silent question. One she answered with a nod and a kiss.

He grasped the fabric of her jeans between his thumb and forefinger and pulled the fabric hard. The button popped loose. This trip seemed to be getting better with each passing second because, slowly, as slowly as he could,

he threaded his hands down her pants and sunk into her heat.

She was wet, so fucking wet, and he was thirty seconds away from embarrassing himself if he didn't focus on literally anything else. He bit at his lips as he slid his fingers along the dampness of her arousal. It was easy to circle into her clit. Each pass of his fingers along her flesh caused her fingers to flex around him, and she arched her back into him.

He worked her—circling, plucking, rubbing with calculated pressure. She was bucking her hips, trying to egg him on, downward. The sight of Penny lost in pleasure was going to keep him hard for weeks. She was exquisite under his fingers—needy, greedy, wanton. After teasing her for a while, he slipped a single finger down, inside of her. Her inner walls clamped down hard against the intrusion. He mouthed a swear into her skin, barely audible over the crackle of flames. Two fingers followed the one. His palm pressing into her clit in time with the thrust of his fingers.

She was bucking, hard, wildly against his hand. Her body was vibrating with her desire. So hard he knew that she was close. She had to be. He pressed his mouth against her ear. Hot words being whispered into sensitive flesh. “You gonna come, baby?”

She nodded frantically.

A small smirk tugged on his lips, and despite already being admonished for it, he couldn't stop the words spilling from his mouth, “You need to be quiet. Don't make a sound, or we'll get caught.”

She didn't respond, simply tightened her grip on him and pumped her hand along the length of his dick faster. He was on the fast track to getting off, but he'd be damned if he was going to come before she did.

He flicked his tongue inside her ear and continued to whisper endearments, instructions to her as he worked his fingers inside of her. Quiet. Barely audible over their

breathing. "Unless you want to get caught riding my fingers."

She let out a shuddering little whimper he quieted by a nip of his teeth along her jaw. "You're already so wet. You're going to drench my hand." Her body was shaking, her hips circling and angling up, pressing further into his touch. "Do you want that? Do you want to scream for me?"

She nodded again and he nearly pulled his fingers away from her. That was a lie. A nuclear bomb dropping wouldn't make him stop; he thought about it though. Next time, when he could take his time with her and he wasn't as desperate to see what she looked like when she broke apart.

Instead, he whispered a faux-stern warning into her ear, "You better not. You better not make a sound."

He pumped a little deeper, pressing the heel of his palm harder against her clit. She turned her head, catching his lips with hers, and then she was there. He could feel it. He could feel the fluttering around his fingers, the stuttering of her breath, the jerks of her hips.

"Yeah." He gasped as he watched her slowly unravel, eyes fixed on hers. "Let me see you."

It was like watching the rise of the sun. She tightened so hard around his fingers he could almost feel it around his dick. Like it was her sex milking him instead of her hand wrapped around his shaft. She flew, mouth wide, in a silent scream, back bowing off the blanket, inner walls convulsing as the waves of pleasure crested over her. She didn't make a single sound. He watched for as long as he could before he lost himself to his own release, thrusting into her hand as he spilled into her palm.

It took him a few seconds to come back to himself. When he did, it was to flushed cheeks and pretty eyes hazily looking at him. Tears had leaked out of the corners of her eyes from the force it had taken to remain quiet through her peak. He smiled, leaning over her and pressing his lips to hers. "You did so good. So fucking good."

Gently, he pulled his hand free of her, immediately moving the digits up to suck them into his mouth. She tasted tart, yet still sweet, and he wanted to moan loudly at the tang of her on his tongue. Her eyes flared at his action, but her hand remained curled around him loosely.

The night air was quiet. Only the soft snores of Luke in the tent could be heard other than the hum of crickets and the occasional *pop* of sap from the firepit.

She hummed, giving the limp length of him a light squeeze, causing him to shudder.

"I think I'm going to sleep really well tonight," she purred, stretching languidly against him.

*Hard same, baby. Hard same.*





## Chapter 9

Alex had a bit of a thing.

It was something he'd known for a long time—longer than he could remember.

Alex could write; he could channel every emotion, every observation into beautifully concise images. He'd described the texture of blood, the pungent smell, the acrid taste of it in the air. He'd described the complexities of joy, the fluttering of contracting muscles in the stomach, the soaring sing in a person's veins. He'd always been able to write what he felt, what he saw, what he needed in order to chronicle what was necessary.

The thing was, although he'd managed to convert his love for the written word into a career—a successful one to boot—it didn't translate well when those words were required to come out of his mouth.

He didn't understand why. He could type frantically, detailed and analytical words pouring from his fingertips. He could compose, hitting poignant arguments without even letting the filter of his brain get involved if it included tapping against the keyboard, but the minute he opened his mouth and the words were meant to drip from his lips, they got stuck. They were garbled, they were ... wrong.

He didn't know what it meant. He didn't know why. He just knew it had always been that way, and in turn, he'd accepted it. Sure, he might not be the best orator, but he could write like a mother fucker, and to Alex that was enough.

Except it wasn't nearly as cut and dry, because he was quick to learn once he'd gotten old enough to start exploring the sexual intricacies of his body with other people, those problems—the ones where he didn't know

what he was supposed to say—weren't really problems anymore.

It was like the minute the blood in his head flowed south, the proverbial filter on his mouth went away and words just seemed to come out. With his mind removed from the equation, he could easily compose the most salaciously detailed speeches on just how good it felt when a girl's mouth was wrapped around his cock. He could audibly bullet point every single thing he wanted to do next.

Although he understood dirty talk wasn't for everyone (he'd had a few girls very expressly ask him to shut the hell up), he also knew there were some girls who were pretty into it. Penny was the latter, and if *that* wasn't the greatest surprise the girl could throw at him, he didn't know what was. Penny liked his filthy mouth. Penny had come around his fingers to his filthy mouth.

He'd spent a lot of time learning her over the years, he hadn't admitted it before now, but knowing her for so long had given him the opportunity to make a lot of observations. One thing he noticed about her was the answering flush every time she received a compliment. It was subtle, demure, and was always followed with her head dipping down and her chin pressing to her chest to hide the stain on her cheeks. He was sure it had something to do with her harridan of a mother. He could imagine the woman's terribly shrill voice shrieking, *"Ladies are meant to be humble, Penelope. Never acknowledge a compliment."*

The second he'd started whispering into her ear, and he watched her bloom under his praise, he couldn't shut himself up. How could he when she was hot, wet, and so fucking beautiful?

His words from last night, the ones where he'd promised her the lengths of his verbosity if he ever got her out of this dastardly forest, popped back up in his mind. Fuck if that wasn't the truth.

He wanted her in a never-ending slew of ways, but at the moment, he'd settle for getting her into an actual bed where he could take his time. He wondered how soon he could possibly get her back to his apartment. The week they went back to their lives in New York? The *day* they went back to their lives in New York?

He'd like to take her on a date, several dates, but he also didn't want to wait to do the other things he wanted. Especially when he already knew what she looked like when she came. He already knew how she tasted. His mouth watered at the memory of sucking on his soaked fingers after he'd brought her to her peak. Her eyes met his across the table.

His thoughts must have been written on his face because hers flushed. Her eyes dipped down to the rope she'd been knotting in her hands. When she looked back up at him, she immediately narrowed her gaze into a glare, silently telling him to knock it off. He reached forward, snagging a berry from the bowl in front of him and popping it in his mouth, chewing with a renewed sparkle in his eye.

Had he mentioned he liked it when she blushed? Because he *really* liked it when she blushed.

"What's on the agenda today, General?" Alex asked, reaching out and grabbing another handful of berries.

She smiled, her eyes crinkling around the edges. "Really? I'm a general?"

"I see it," Luke said from behind them. Alex turned, eyebrows raising, watching as Luke tossed a few smaller logs onto the fire.

Alex chuckled as he shot an unrepentant grin at the redhead.

Penny looked like she was going to say something, something that was going to be easily n.s.f.l. (not safe for Luke). Instead, she arched one of her golden brows, stretched her shoulders, and fixed him with a look he knew would make him regret asking. "Fishing."

“Fishing?” he asked, eyes dipping down toward the lake.  
“Fishing,” she confirmed.

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“So, where do we start?”

Penny’s eyes darted up and down his frame. Alex was standing, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet and slapping his hands together. He was in a shockingly good mood, but he wasn’t altogether surprised. To be honest, he’d always kind of wanted to try fishing. Out of all the outdoorsy things this trip entailed, it was the only one that didn’t seem all that terrible.

It was a typical American pastime, steeped in tradition. An activity that could bridge the gap through generations and could conquer any sort of malfeasance between two people if the one fly-fishing movie he couldn’t remember the name of was to be believed.

Every time Luke or Penny brought up their quintessentially Mayberry childhood, something inside of him would ache. It wasn’t that he was jealous or angry by any means. He was a realist, he knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault he’d been dealt a shitty hand of cards, and harboring bad energy wouldn’t be conducive to achieving any sort of peace. Alex still wanted to know what it was like.

Maybe it wasn’t with his father and he bonding over reeling in trout, but Alex couldn’t help that. In the end, Luke and Penny had been more like family to him over the course of the last seven years than anyone in Toledo had been. So maybe it wasn’t conventional, but it was right.

“*We* are not starting anywhere today.”

He wrinkled his brow. All Penny did was point behind him. He turned to where Luke was approaching with two fishing poles. Alex didn’t know where they’d come from, not that he had done a particularly good job paying attention when they’d unpacked the car, but he would think he’d remember

two seven-foot fishing poles angled awkwardly into a station wagon when they were driving.

Did they have a storage shed or something up here he didn't know about?

Actually, why didn't they have a storage shed up here to put some of this stuff in instead of packing it all up every time they came out? Luke said his dad owned the property, it made sense. Alex would have to bring it up after he figured out what this was.

"What exactly are we doing?"

"Practicing casting."

"Right."

Luke held up a decent-sized washer, which was about the size of Alex's fingers if he pressed his forefinger to his thumb.

"I don't think that's how fishing works, Luke."

"You think I'm letting you loose with a hook without practicing first? Knowing both of our luck, that hook would end up lodged somewhere on my body, and I don't feel like having Penny drive me to the hospital."

"Why does Penny get to drive you to the hospital," Alex asked waspishly.

"She's a better driver."

Speaking of Penny, his eyes danced behind him to see what she was up to. She wasn't there, he let his gaze bounce around the camp until it met with her figure, grabbing something out of the car. She shut the door, giving them a quick wave. "Have fun, boys, don't wear yourselves out; we're hiking tomorrow." Then she promptly turned on her heel and headed down the gravel road.

His brows flew nearly to the edge of the beanie he was wearing. Penny was heading down the road, and he was one hundred percent certain they would not survive without her. She was the Hermione of their trio, and here she was leaving Ron and Harry in the woods to starve to death. "Where are you going? Where is she going?"

"Checking the satphone."

"Upchiniup what now?"

"Satellite. Phone," Luke drawled, punctuating the words harshly. As if he was deaf, when in reality he was just confused.

"Yeah, I got that," Alex deadpanned, widening his eyes comically.

"Dad, well, more Penny's mom, makes us check in every day. If we didn't, she'd already be up here wielding a pitchfork and engulfing us all in the fires of hell."

A startlingly accurate visual if he'd ever heard one. "Did you just compare Penny's mom to Satan?"

"I did, but I honestly feel like it's unfair to him."

Alex cocked his head to the side. "You aren't wrong."

Checking in, huh? He wasn't particularly keen to be disturbed out here, but it would have been good to know they had a functioning phone if there were any emergencies. Not that he could think of anyone who would actively call him who wasn't already here. Maybe Vivian? God, he hoped not.

Luke tied the washer onto the end of the fishing line. Alex picked up the pole, surprised by the weight of it in his hands.

"Reeling is the easy part." Luke picked up his own fishing pole, rotating the small handle near the base of the pole.

"I'm not completely ignorant; I've seen movies before, you know." He mimicked Luke's movements, surprised at the easy glide of the line spooling into the reel. He didn't expect for it to be so smooth.

"Like I said, reeling is easy. Unless you catch the Loch Ness Monster and you have to fight, but the last time I checked, this lake only had rainbows so ..."

He did his best to act as if he knew what the hell Luke was talking about. "Right."

"Now this metal piece here stops the line from dragging out." Luke flicked a small metal half-circle over to the other

side of the reel, the line immediately dropped, the washer hit the ground with an audible *thud*. “The tricky part is holding the line while casting.”

Luke angled the pole behind him, his thumb holding the line, and made a small circular motion with his arm, flicking the tip of the pole out. The line soared through the air in a perfect arch, a good twenty feet in front of them, before the washer hit the ground in a puff of dirt. He flicked the metal semi-circle back to the other side and began reeling the line back in.

The dots connected in Alex’s mind. *Okay, all right. That made sense.* He flicked over the metal piece on his pole, the washer plummeted to the ground faster than he’d anticipated. “Shit,” he mumbled.

“It’s all good. Just reel it back up.”

He did. This time when he flipped the guard over, he was able to keep pressure on the line, stopping the washer from dropping. His hand, however, was positioned pretty awkwardly and did not feel natural whatsoever. He used both hands until he was able to hold the line and pole without feeling like he was holding a sword. It took a while for him to puzzle it out. Luke gave him tips, but for the most part, let Alex move through the sequence as he learned.

The first cast was ... not great. The washer went maybe four feet in front of him.

Luke laughed, which made Alex laugh, but he kept at it.

By the time he’d cast six times, he’d managed to easily set up his hands. Eliminating half the effort as he had expelled before. After another fifteen minutes, he thought he might even be good at this someday.

He and Luke cast side by side. His washer made it further than Luke’s. His eyebrows rose as his friend said, “Nice job, man. I might not even be afraid of putting a hook on that thing.”

“I’m just as surprised as you are.”



Luke motioned toward the lake. "What do you think, you want to try it live?"

He shrugged. "Sure, what the hell."

One thing no one told him about fishing was it was essentially just sitting/or standing. That was it. Despite having to clump nasty-smelling power bait onto a hook (it was better than the worm idea; he was *not* doing the worm idea), casting was arguably pretty fun. Literally, all he did was stand there with a pole in hand, staring at a red and white bobber in the water, and waited. Until a fish had the inkling to possibly bite. Occasionally they reeled their lines back in and recast, but for the most part, they just stood there. Talking. Joking.

He totally forgot about Penny. Which he supposed was maybe part of the allure of what they were doing. Especially since Penny was not something he was eager to forget, but he'd been so wrapped up in their situation, suddenly having the realization he hadn't been thinking about her was a jolt.

Alex spun the handle of the reel a quarter turn, looking out over the peaceful quiet of the lake. It looked darker today, and he wondered what that meant. Maybe it was something to do with the way the sun was filtering through the clouds, maybe it had to do with the chemistry of the lake and the time of year. He didn't know, but he'd make it a point to ask Penny about it later. It sounded like something she'd know the answer to.

A gull squawked in the distance; he could just make out its form over the line of trees. Wind danced lightly through the branches, and the limbs swayed gently in the distance. It was a small movement, almost imperceptible, but it was somehow significant. The sun beat down, warming his exposed arms in his T-shirt. It wasn't nearly as warm as it had been yesterday, but he was comfortable. More than comfortable in his jeans and T-shirt standing on the side of the lake. He was struck, again, by just how pretty it was out

here. Sure, New York was pretty, in its own way, but New York was a never-ending crush.

Out here was different. Out here it was almost like there wasn't a sense of time. All there was, was the lapping of the water against the shore and the gentle bob of his bobber in the water. He watched it, the red and white peaceful against the surface. As aptly named a device as he could think of.

Bob. Bob. Bob.

It was practically hypnotic to watch. Until it disappeared. His brow furrowed. The line zipped through his pole. Luke was yelling, "Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!"

"What?"

"You caught a fish! Yank up the tip and set the hook." Luke mimicked the action. Alex yanked the pole, letting instinct take over as he furiously rotated the reel. The line struggled and he reeled faster. He could see the distorted image of something coming through the water, something that didn't look all that big but didn't look small either. Luke was grinning like a madman, net in hand as he waded a few steps into the water.

Alex kept reeling and, suddenly, Luke was lifting the net out of the water, fish and all. The fish's gills flexed, and he swore it was looking directly into his eyes. Luke brought the fish to shore in the net, hooking a finger into one of its gills and removing the hook from the fish's lip. He motioned for Alex to take it, and despite himself and the fact he really did not want to, he hooked his finger into the gill. It was the weirdest, grossest feeling he'd ever experienced.

This was a fish. This was a fish *he'd* caught.

He grinned. "I caught a fucking fish."

"Hell yeah, you did."

He lifted his hand and met Luke's in a high-five.

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When they made it back to the table, Penny was lost in her book. Her shoulder's dropped when she finally looked up and saw that it was them and a genuine smile curved across her face as her eyes dropped to their hands. "How'd you guys do?"

Luke lifted the stringer for inspection. "We got four, more than enough for dinner tonight."

"Perfect." She motioned for the fish, which was quickly delivered and surveyed as she stepped toward the picnic table. She stopped, fixing Alex with an expectant look. "Are you coming?"

Alex rolled his eyes at her sass but followed her anyway.

She unrolled a plastic cutting board and opened up an empty coffee can. He idly wondered if the can had always been empty or if he'd managed to drink them dry already. She lined it with a plastic bag before she took out an eight-inch fillet knife. He took an imperceptible step back. He was coming to realize camping was essentially navigating a week while Penny displayed her deftness at handling literally any weapon known to mankind. She was the heroine authors dreamed of, and his mind zipped at the thought of Spencer with a blonde ponytail. Now that was a thought ...

"Have you ever cleaned a fish before?"

He angled his head, lowering his brows in concern. "Why would I have cleaned a fish if I've never caught one?"

"I was just asking." She handed him the knife and placed one of the fish onto the table directly in front of him. She motioned toward it. "First off, cut off the head."

He blinked. Once. Twice. "What?"

She made a sawing motion with her hand, indicating what she wanted him to do. "Cut off the head of the fish."

His eyes flicked down to the fish in front of him, it was one of the smaller ones, one of the ones he'd reeled in. "But that's where the eyes are."

She rolled her eyes, letting out a little huff as she looked at him with an amused expression. "Do you want to eat it

when it still has eyes?"

"No!" His voice had gotten higher, uncomfortably high for being in front of the woman he was *involved* with.

"Then cut off the head."

He looked directly into the unseeing fish's eyes before mumbling a quick "I'm sorry." It took him a long time before he started sawing through the top of the fish, removing the head. It was gross. It was insanely gross. Penny stood at his side, grabbed her own knife, and slid another fish onto the plastic mat. She removed the head with one quick cut. Once it was off, she grabbed the head of her fish with her bare hand and tossed it into the bucket. "Now you are going to cut it right up the belly." She immediately started working the knife into the underside of the fish, filleting it open.

He stared at her. "Do I have to?"

"Yes."

Cringing, he pressed the tip of the knife to the underside of the fish, right where Penny had. He pushed, but it wasn't hard enough to break through. In fact, it was a lot harder than he thought it was to pierce the flesh of the fish and when he did, he gagged—hard.

"Cut it all the way open," she instructed matter-of-factly.

So, he did. He didn't know fish had so much stuff inside of them. He watched in horror as Penny wrapped her hands, her beautiful, gorgeous, madness-inducing hands, around slimy fish guts and pulled them out of the fish's body, tossing them into the can with a loud splat.

"Oh my god," he managed to choke out around gags.

"It's not *that* bad, you big baby. Just do it."

He took a sucking breath through his nose. "I literally don't think I can."

She picked up a rag, wiping her hands on it. He wanted to tell her the rag wasn't going to help the stench of death and dismemberment, but he was afraid if he tried, he'd vomit all over their table. "You are literally using the word literally wrong. I thought you were better than that."

He had to smile at her response. “*Touché.*” Then he reached in, his hands met fish guts. “Oh god, it’s gushy. Why is it gushy?”

She was laughing now. She was honest to god laughing at him. “Well, saying the word gushy probably isn’t helping.”

He figured he was just going to have to bite the bullet and get it done. With scraping movements, he ripped as much of the intestines out of the fish as he could until he smacked the innards into the coffee can. He held his hand out in front of him, trying not to look at it, or think about it. Trying really, really hard not to puke all over the place. “I did it. I can’t believe I did it.”

“Perfect,” Penny said sweetly. Too sweet. She smirked at him. “Two more.” *Fuck.*

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Penny had been a bit quiet after dinner ended. Not in the “you found out my secrets” way, as when he’d accidentally stumbled upon the marks on her palms, or the “I’m actively ignoring you” way, which seemed to be the generic response he got when it came to women; but in a way he wasn’t familiar with. It seemed different. She wasn’t entirely herself, but she wasn’t entirely not herself either.

Instead of doing what he usually did and promptly descended into a spiral of what-if scenarios, he leaned in, just a bit, angling his head down to bring his lips a few inches from her shoulder. “Everything okay?”

She looked up from her book, giving him a weary smile. “Yeah, my mom ...”

Three words that could tell as detailed of a story as any he’d ever written. Clear, concise, succinct. He understood exactly what she meant. He raised both hands, palms out, spreading his fingers wide. “Ah. Say no more.”

“She’s not that bad,” she chided, pressing her bookmark between the pages and closing the book on itself.

He shook his head. "I don't know how you of all people can say that."

In his humble opinion, when it came to bad, Alice Foster was the worst. He'd once watched the demon chastise Penny for a solid forty-five minutes because she didn't pick up milk when she hadn't been informed she was supposed to. Alice actually admonished her daughter because she hadn't read her mind and just known what they'd needed.

Her eyes trailed away with her voice. "She just wants the best for me."

"But she forgets you get to decide what that is." He punctuated the words aggressively in the hazy summer night. Her eyes grew warm and soft, nearly liquid before they flicked to where Luke was buried head-first in the car, and pressed a sweet kiss to his lips.

"Thank you," she whispered. Then she pulled away, pushing herself to stand. "I think I'm going to lay down. For some reason, I just really want to be warm and horizontal."

"Can I help?"

She angled her head, her ponytail bouncing happily behind her as an impish smile tugged on her lips. "I wouldn't say no."

*Saucy minx, with her incredibly tempting ... everything.*

"I didn't mean it like that," he drawled, picking up an errant leaf from the table and tossing it to the side.

Her voice dropped again. "I was hoping you meant it both ways."

He groaned, throwing his head back to look at the sky and not the inviting tilt of her brows. "You're killing me."

She chuckled, giving his shoulder a lingering squeeze, and headed toward the tent. Luke was walking toward them from the car, a paper bag clutched in one of his hands. Penny intersected his path. "I'm going to bed, Luke." She pressed herself up onto her toes giving him a barely-there kiss on the cheek before unzipping the tent and disappearing inside.

"What's with her?" Luke turned, his face creased in confusion. He had the right to be confused, it was still daylight. Albeit, sun was setting, so darkness wasn't too far off.

"Mom," was all Alex said. It was all he needed to say. Luke's face immediately morphed into understanding as he walked the remaining distance to the table.

"Ah. Well, I guess that leaves more for us." Luke reached into the bag, pulling out a silver bottle with a green label. Alex recognized the script, he recognized the things that usually happened when he saw that script. *Fucking Hornitos*.

"You've had a fifth of tequila the entire time?"

Luke seemed insulted he'd even asked such a question. "Of course, I have."

"You're telling me this now? I can think of fifteen different occasions you could've brought this out," he scoffed incredulously. He sounded offended. He *was* offended.

"Name one," his friend said, raising a finger between them.

"The fire, the poison ivy, the fact that I was breathing air ... pick one."

The redhead just shrugged. "I forgot."

Alex crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his gaze in a mock glare. "Pshhhhh, you forgot."

With a twisting motion, Luke broke the seal on the fifth. At least this time he didn't toss the thing over his shoulder with a flippant, "Eh, we aren't going to need it." That had been a bad night for Alex, and a shitty next day, as well. Was it just him or were hangovers getting harder the older he got?

Luke brought the bottle to his lips, taking a swig. "So, what do you say, you hitting this or what?"

He weighed the options. On one hand, he could get shit-faced, knee-walking drunk with his best friend. On the other hand, there was an incredibly sexy woman he was most

definitely into, laying in a tent who'd intimated they'd fool around if he could secure them some alone time.

Sorry, bro. "No, man, I'll pass. I'm beat."

Luke looked like he was personally insulted by Alex's answer. "Come ON! WEAK."

Then came a near choreographed sequence of back and forth arguments.

"Give me a break. I murdered a fish today."

"You did not murder a fish; you caught a fish."

"Then I mutilated its corpse!"

"You cleaned it."

"I feasted on its flesh!"

That seemed to derail Luke. He threw his hands up, shaking his head and picking up the bottle, taking another heavy swig. "I give up, man."

"Yeah, I know, I'm milking it. I'm tired. I'm going to go lay down."

"Amateur," Luke muttered, shaking his head.

Woods amateur. Very much yes. Alex chuckled, motioning for the bottle. "Don't hit that thing too hard, Luke. We can't forget the tequila incident our junior year."

Luke's hackles instantly rose, his mouth dropping open. "You are never going to let that go, are you?"

Was he kidding? That was the number one Luke-blackmail story he had. Like he was going to let him forget that. "I picked you up from campus security naked; hell no, I'm not going to let that go."

They uttered one more parting sentiment, a quick goodnight before Alex turned, moving the exact path Penny had toward the tent. He may hate the fucking thing, but with the prospect of having Penny inside of it all to himself, he definitely disliked it a great deal less. A wicked smile broke across his face as he tossed one look back at Luke who was mumbling to himself as he unzipped his guitar case.





# Chapter 10

The moment he ducked inside the tent, his eyes caught Penny's. She was already burrowed underneath her blankets, looking decidedly warm and entirely too comfortable. He took the time to toe-off his boots, but other than that, all bets were off. He practically dove at her. The action and its haste caused him to pin her arms to her side as his mouth pressed soundly to hers. She wiggled, and he had to lean over to one side then the other to allow her arms loose.

"Managed to get away, did you?" He nodded a response, and she hummed in appreciation. "How much time do we have?"

He barely removed his lips from hers to respond. "He's got a fifth of tequila and a guitar. Historical precedents suggest at least an hour before we have to carry him in here."

She giggled, bunching her hands into the fabric of his T-shirt, pulling it up, off, and tossing it somewhere to the side. Alex didn't care to look where it landed, all he cared about was the blanket currently separating them was making access to her body impossible. Why the hell were there so many blankets? He knew the answer to that—warmth, comfort, either and/or both. He rolled to the side with the intention of ripping the damn things off and launching them out of the tent.

Penny, however, had other plans. Faster than he thought was humanly possible, she was out from under the covers. Then she was crossing her arms at her waist, gripping the edge of her tank top in her hands and doing an elaborate crisscross with her arms, divesting herself of her shirt.

He stared. He stared some more.

Penny wasn't wearing a shirt ... or a bra. Those were her breasts. Her incredible, mouthwatering, awe-inspiring breasts. They were round and full. They were peaked with the small circles of her dusky pink areolas, already pulled tight into puckered beads. Saliva pooled in his mouth as words flowed through his mind. Words he was about to let stream out of his lips like the opening of the floodgates at the Hoover Dam.

Penny grinned, lifting a shoulder as she asked saucily, "Like what you see?"

Did he like what he saw?

"Come here," he nearly begged.

He'd never heard himself sound so desperate. Instead of waiting for her to come to him, to lean forward and press her mouth back to his, he leaned up, wrapping his hands around her small waist, and crushing her to him. His mouth met hers in a furious kiss. She rolled her hips on top of his, rocking her body against his ever-hardening length. He groaned, leaning his body back onto the foam, bringing her with him.

"We still have to be quiet, you know."

He nearly groaned again, this time in frustration. "This place is a prison." She nipped at his bottom lip, and he forgot if he intended to form an argument to her reminder.

"I'll make it up to you," she murmured as she rocked her hips over him.

*Yes. Please.*

"Yeah? How you gonna do that?"

Their voices were low, hushed in the night. He could hear Luke's strums through the tent; and he let the music and darkness envelop them, wrapping its midnight arms around their stolen respite and effectively transferring them into their own little world. Where it was nothing but the two of them, whispered words, and the stars.

As quickly as everything started, it stopped. Penny stopped the hypnotic rocking that was slowly driving him insane and she angled herself off of him. He grabbed for her,

trying to pull her back over him. She swatted his hands away, seating herself on her bed, and making sure she had his full attention before she threaded her thumbs into the thin cotton of her shorts and slid them down her legs. She flicked the shorts to the side.

There she was, with her weight braced on her arms, completely naked. It was like a dream come true. His eyes dipped down to the V between her legs, to the thin, manicured strip of blonde hair peeking up at him. He moved slow, predatorily as he shifted forward, angling himself over her. Penny moved with him, leaning back onto her pillow as he covered her body with his.

He trailed the fingers of his right hand lightly over the newly exposed skin of her hip, up onto the flat plane of her abdomen, veering off to splay wide on her ribs before he cupped her breast. "I'm not one to complain about my good fortune, but are you sure we're not moving too fast?"

"We're adults, Alex. We're old enough to decide what pace we choose to indulge our sexuality."

He blew out a short breath. "I know, I just don't want you to do something you aren't comfortable with."

She pulled him down, farther onto her, crossing her arms around his neck. "If you did something I didn't like, believe me, you'd know. I want you to touch me."

His eyes dipped down to the mounded swells of her breasts pressed against his chest. "Where?" he asked. He didn't need her to answer him, he already knew where she wanted him, but he wanted to hear her say it, wanted her words as much as he wanted to be able to voice his.

"Everywhere."

He shifted down, letting his lips skim over the edge of her jaw, the line of her throat, the protrusions of her collarbones. He licked into the indent, marveling at the rise of her chest against his tongue. Collarbones weren't meant to be sexy, were they? Why did he find her collarbones so sexy? He pushed himself off of her, bracing his body on his knees as

he trailed his lips down, over the swell of her breast, exactly where he wanted to be, exactly where he knew she wanted him. "Any suggestions on where to start?"

"Dealer's choice." She threaded her fingers into his hair, and he let a wicked grin break across his face before he swooped down and sucked her left nipple between his teeth. Her body immediately bowed, her back angling off the bed as she thrust her breasts up into his eager mouth. He sucked, laving his tongue over the pert bead as he moved his other hand to cup her opposite breast, kneading roughly as he worshipped one strained tip. He kept at it until her body was shaking, until the tiny, little noises she was making were definitely making him crazy, and her hips were grinding up from the bed, seeking friction with the tight seam of his pants.

It was easy to get lost in the velvet of her skin. To forget about everything other than making her feel good. It was something he'd never been particularly focused on before. Alex wasn't selfish in bed; he was a stern advocate for making sure his partner was satisfied, whoever it was, but with every soft indecipherable whimper, every roll of her hips, every scratch of her nails in his skin, it was somehow more important. The more pleasure he gave her, the harder he got, the glassier her eyes became, the closer he came to his own completion. If he wasn't mistaken, if he really tried, the simple act of getting Penny off might be enough for him to do the same.

He really was back in high school.

Her hands were sure and strong as they moved around his body. When they made their way to his front and trailed over the sensitive skin of his abdomen, his muscles spasmed at the electricity of her touch. It was tentative, teasing, meant to torment him the same way he was intent on tormenting her. Until she was through with teasing, and without warning pushed his pants over his hips. She didn't bother with the button or zipper, simply worked them down

until he popped free and she could wrap her fingers around his torrid length.

He jumped at the feeling of her hand stroking over his hot flesh. His mouth caught hers, mumbling lightly, "Easy, baby."

He kept his hips up, off of her, because he was cognizant of the fact that two very important body parts were exposed, and one of them was very eager to get inside of the other. She pumped him again and he swayed forward as their lips tangled in lazy kisses. As though they weren't hidden in a tent, with their very ignorant friend outside, drinking and singing his heart out. As if they had all the time in the world, to kiss and bite, to learn and suck.

"You're so hard."

He could make any series of noises in order to communicate what those words did to him, because they *did* do things to him. "Seems to be an increasing development whenever you're around."

She grinned. "You aren't doing a very good job of being quiet."

His eyes dipped down to her mouth, heavy-lidded as he fixed on the plush, bruised petals. "Do you really want me to shut up? I think you like the things that come out of my mouth."

"I do."

He rewarded her with a hard kiss, skimming the hand not propping him above her over her knee, up her thigh, his thumb firmly pressing into the sensitive inner flesh. "Good."

Penny swooped to the side, fixing her mouth onto his neck. He groaned, a little louder than he should, stretching the skin to give her better access. She worked her mouth in time with her hand. He was finding it more and more difficult to keep himself away from her. He buried his face in the juncture of her neck. Her hot breath blew in his ear as she spoke, her lips rasping against the sensitive shell. "I think you like it when I do it, too."

*Baby, there isn't a single thing you do that I don't like. I'll like anything, everything you give me.*

"What's that?" His voice was muffled by her skin.

"Talk." He pulled away, fixing her with a curious look. "Wanna find out?"

He was puzzled by what she meant. He'd always known he liked to talk. That the context of his words, the complexity of them, and using them to slowly disassemble a woman gave him a shocking amount of pleasure. Words held value, words held substance. Words were what revolutionized the world, and separated mankind from animals. He'd always known his enjoyment, his fascination with words was beyond what others considered normal. He'd accepted it, but he'd never considered it could go both ways. Often times, when he found himself in the heat of the moment, his partner seemed like they were only responding to placate him. He'd never had someone actively respond, actively participate, actively enjoy it as much as he did. So, slowly, unsurely, he nodded.

"Alex," she moaned. His head dipped, threading his nose against hers, eyes locked, lips barely a hairsbreadth apart. "I'm so wet."

*Holy fucking fuck.*

He exhaled a shuddering breath. "I want a taste."

She seemed to like his comment as much as he did. He shifted down, intent on attempting to get the taste he'd requested, but she held him exactly where he was, his mouth playing with her, their words caressing each other as effectively as their bodies.

"There's not enough room."

The tent was small, he was tall, and she was right. Being able to lay himself out so he could bury his face between her thighs was probably not likely. But he *could* be creative. Actually, he really liked the potential necessity of being creative. There was more than enough room for her to straddle his face. He could sit up, he could pull her hips up,

throw her legs over his shoulders as he devoured her. "I'll find room."

She quivered underneath him. With a shuffle, she uncurled her fingers from the length of him and dipped them between her legs. Another shuffle and she brought them to his mouth, hooking her fingers past his lips. He sucked, hard, letting his tongue swirl over the coated digits. His tongue mimicked exactly what he wanted to do against her clit, trying to tempt her into letting him. "Not enough. Let me bury my tongue in your pussy."

She whimpered as the word dripped from his lips. She shook her head and wrapped her hand back around his cock. "Don't you want to feel me?"

With one sentence she completely turned the tables.

"Penny ..." he whispered. Like a prayer, like an oath, like he'd never experience anything quite as sublime as her ever again.

"I want to feel you against me. Just for a second. Please." She guided him forward, massaging the head of his dick against her clit. "Just right here. Just like this."

The thick ridge of him glided through her wet folds. She was already so wet she covered his length in her juices as he ground against her. It felt entirely too good. It made him think of hundreds of things, all of them categorized by what he wanted to do to her, do with her.

She moaned into his mouth, the smallest, prettiest sound he'd ever heard in his life.

"I'd give anything to hear you scream." He hooked his hand in the back of her knee, bringing it up and over his hip. They moved together, until the only thing he knew was the taste of her lips, the warmth of her heat, the feeling of her legs wrapped around his back. She drove her hips back as he slid over her, farther than before. She was so slick, so wet, the tip of him easily dented into her opening.

He froze. He was so close, all he'd have to do was move forward and he'd be buried inside of her.



His chest heaved; his eyes moved up to meet hers. She was flushed, her lips slightly parted, and her gaze fixed on him. She nodded a little, just a little, but he still didn't move. Not until she whispered against his mouth, "Please," and with the pull of her hands on his lower back, he seated himself to the hilt.

"Oh god, Penny ..."

She urged him to move, but he couldn't, not yet. He needed a minute, a minute to compose himself. A minute to just feel her, feel what it was like to be inside of her, to be a part of her with nothing separating them. "Not yet, baby. Not yet. Give me a minute. Let me just feel you."

For a long time, they just looked at each other, absorbing the moment. When he was finally ready to move, to stroke into her, he pulled back with careful tenderness. She nodded, cupping her hand to his cheek and bringing his mouth to hers. "Slow," she breathed. Their lips tangled slow and passionately as he eased in and out of her at a snail's pace, like the gentle lap of the surf on the shore in the stillest of evenings. "Just like that."

"You feel so good," he mumbled against her lips.

She instantly responded, "You're so deep."

She was right. He liked it. He really, really liked it. They'd had one sexual encounter together and she'd worked out that he'd like her with a dirty mouth, just as he'd deduced she loved being told how good she was doing. The result was a blazing inferno of teeth and tongue, of the euphoric build to ecstasy. "I'm lost in you, Penny. I'm drowning. You feel so good. I can't think about anything except how tight you are around my cock. How good you feel. How I never want to stop fucking you."

"Don't stop. Please ... please don't stop," she murmured against his mouth as he thrust into her with shallow strokes. Slow, easy, and so fucking perfect it was driving him mad.

He licked into her mouth, meeting her tongue in a messy tangle. "So polite. Such a sweet girl. Give me another taste,

baby. I want to taste how sweet you are when I'm inside you."

He felt her hand move, sliding hot against his skin. Her fingers dove between them, his pelvis grinding against her hand as she coated her fingertips with her juices. Seconds later, she was pressing shaky pads against his lips and he was sucking them into his mouth, licking the digits to get every last drop. He hummed at the taste and she whimpered softly.

She adjusted her legs, moving them up to settle higher on his hips. He knew it was to take him deeper, to urge him to go a little faster, but he wasn't giving in just yet. He slid nearly free of her, holding for a long series of moments until her fingers curled into his skin, and he felt the answering sting. Pleasure shot through him at the bite of nails into his flesh, and he exhaled as he let himself slide all the way back into her tight heat.

"I'm close."

Thank, Christ, because he didn't know how much longer he was going to last. He rotated his hips, thrusting into her in a circular motion. "I can't wait to feel you come."

She bit at her lips to quiet her moans. "Are you going to come with me?" His lashes fluttered, but he didn't answer. He couldn't find the words. He didn't have to, because Penny firmly took the reins toward their climax. "Come with me, Alex. I'm so close. I'm almost there."

He couldn't think anymore, only feel—her skin, her mouth, the tightness of her cunt. "Penny ..."

"Oh god, just like that, just like that, don't stop. Come with me; come inside me."

Penny Foster had apparently taken the course on how to make a guy blow his load in ten seconds or less because that was all it took for him to lose every sense of time and space and empty himself inside of her. He rode out his climax, barely focusing on the tight clamp of her muscles as she tumbled after him. He was making little noises, and he was

grateful he hadn't completely forgotten himself and roared when he came. They'd both somehow managed to be relatively quiet considering, but their harsh breathing still sounded like shouting in the night. Around them crickets chirped, the fire crackled, the guitar strings hummed, Luke still sang. It was all the same as it had been a half-hour earlier, except for inside the tent, everything had changed.

"Oh my god," she murmured.

His sentiment exactly.

What had just happened had been everything. He'd never had sex like that before. It had been the most powerfully intense experience of his life. Hands down, the best sex he'd ever had, and that it happened with her, with *this* girl, was probably just as terrifying as anything he'd ever done.

No, that hadn't been sex. It couldn't have been. He'd had sex before, that was more. It *was* more ...

He laid there, staring at her, until he realized that he was probably crushing her. He gave her a small, sheepish smile as he slipped out of her, shifting to the side. "That was ..."

She bit her lip, giving him a little nod. "Yeah."

"I've never ..." He'd never done a lot of things—felt like this, experienced sex like that, had sex without a condom, fuck ... he'd actually came inside of her ... he'd never done any of it.

"I know." He lifted his brow, they might have known each other for seven years, but not even she could know him that well. She brought a hand up to tug at the curl sweeping into his face. "We talked about it the other day."

Understanding dawned as his mind went back to the day at the picnic table where they'd talked about safe-sex practices. Penny was on birth control, Penny was regularly tested, and honestly, even if he hadn't known those very important pieces of information, he'd trust her with his life. Well, at least they hadn't been completely irresponsible,

even if it was unintentional. "Was it okay? I mean, we were kind of lost in the heat of the moment ..."

"No! No. God it was ..." She smiled, a beautiful beaming smile that seemed to light up the tent. His eyes fixed on it, a short, amazed laugh escaping him as he brought his hand up to cup her cheek, bringing his mouth to hers. "Jesus, Penny, I'm fucking crazy about you."

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He was jarred awake with a swift kick to one of his feet. It was Luke's doing. He was certain of it. Which made no sense, because the kick was accompanied with the sweet sing-song of Penny's voice. "Wake up, boys, rise and shine."

*Dear god, no.*

He groaned, rolling over onto his stomach and grabbing blindly for a pillow to hold over his head. Maybe he'd get lucky and it would suffocate him. At least then he wouldn't have to get up. Another kick followed the first, this time higher, on the outside of his right thigh. "Get up. We have a hike to start."

Mentally, he tracked the two paths this scenario could culminate into. He could continue to feign sleep and end up with his blonde paramour kicking him in the teeth, or he could face the day head-on and prepare for a day of hiking. He couldn't decide which one sounded less painful. He rolled back over, his eyes firmly fixed shut. "At midnight?" he grumbled tiredly, reaching up to press one of his palms into his eye. He rubbed lightly, a glob of goop getting stuck to his hand. He frowned, flicking his hand to get it off.

Her voice was unamused as she corrected him, "It's seven in the morning."

He finally found the strength to crack one of his eyes open. Penny was wearing light grey leggings and a loose sweater. Her hair was groomed back into that sleek ponytail that made her look impossibly put-together for the early

hour. She was bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and entirely too chipper for her own good. For a second, he couldn't help but hate her.

Morning people were something else.

"It's the exact same thing."

She bent down, snagging something from the floor and launching it at him. His limbs windmilled in the air as he attempted to block the oncoming assault. He missed, and the tread of one of his boots hit him in the stomach. It didn't hurt, but he still let out an audible "oof" as she happily chirped, "If we don't start now, we won't get up there with enough time to spend time at the lake. Or we will, and it'll be dark when we head back, and I am *not* hiking down a mountain in the dark. That's how people get lost. Get up."

He brought the boot up, hugging it to his chest as he moaned, "Baby, you're killing me."

His bid for sympathy was apparently for naught, because instead of cooing, laying down next to him, and kissing him senseless, she chuckled. "You say that a lot."

Heartless this one. Completely and utterly heartless.

"Because it's true."

"No, because if every time you've inferred that I was trying to kill you was compounded together, you'd be actually dead by now." She picked up his other shoe, extending it to him with an expectant expression. At least this time she handed it to him and didn't lob it at his face.

Alex heaved a massive sigh, reaching out and taking the proffered shoe before dropping his hand back to the bed. He hadn't moved, he wasn't mentally prepared for that. His head was still pillowed exactly where it had been, eyes staring tiredly at the ceiling of the tent. So, Penny, with her black magic and lack of empathy to those who enjoyed a long morning respite, broke out the big guns. "Please, Alex. I don't want to pack everything by myself, and Luke drank so much last night we won't be able to get him up until we perform an exorcism."

Her tone was pleading, her face was gorgeous, and he was unfairly fond of her. With a very, very begrudging drawl, he ceded, "Fine. Give me a second."

She gave him a beaming smile, the same smile that clawed at the inside of his chest and made his stomach flip-flop as if there were goddamn fish in there. Live ones, thankfully, but also dead ones, he couldn't have digested them that quickly. He remembered the fish's eyes staring into his soul and he winced.

With an added bounce to her step, she popped out of the tent, assumedly to start packing. He heaved himself to a seated position, a boot in either hand, with Luke snoring like a freight train directly next to him.

He knew what the redhead would say if he was capable of consciousness. Alex was fucking whipped. He harshly carded his hand through his hair. Totally, completely, happily whipped.

He could see a massive spot of drool on Luke's pillow. He vaguely remembered getting his legs stepped on four times last night as Luke had battled his way to the bed. With the volume of his snores, the drool, and the memory Luke didn't say a goddamn thing about Penny being tucked into Alex's side on his way down, he would be surprised if the entire bottle of tequila wasn't empty.

Alex quickly pulled on clothes before he stuffed his socked feet into his boots and made his way into the early morning air. Penny was standing next to the table, focused on packing things into one of the backpacks, all pretty purple sweater and insanely well-fitting leggings. He passed right by the cup of coffee she'd set out for him, the wisping tendrils of steam rising from the magnificent concoction like a siren's call. Instead, he made a beeline directly for her, wandering around the table to wrap his arms around her waist, tugging her back into him.

"Come here," he drawled quietly into the curve of her neck.

Without hesitation, she sunk into him, and he felt his body hum in appreciation of her warmth. He swayed a little, his arms flexing around her, pulling her just a little tighter against him. He craned his head over her shoulder, intent on pressing his lips to hers. She wrinkled her nose, angling her head away from him. "No! Brush your teeth."

Hey. Rude.

He pouted, his lower lip pressing out dramatically as she leaned forward, pulling against his hold. He grappled for her as she continued to try and wiggle out of his grasp. "Come here!" he whined.

"No!" she practically squealed as he grabbed at her side. She squirmed and giggled and fought to get away, but he held her firmly.

The least he could get for waking up at the crack of dawn was a kiss. Just a little one? Wait, why was he saying this to himself?

Her struggle had turned her body so their stomachs were pressed together and she was leaning back into the circle of his arms. They started that barely-there sway again. If he hadn't wanted to kiss her before, he definitely did now. "Just a small one?" he cajoled.

She rolled her eyes, but she eventually reached up one of her hands to grasp his chin between her thumb and forefinger, bringing his face down to give him a quick, chaste peck on his lips. It lingered, warmth spread within him, hot air inflating his chest until the pressure reached its limits and he could very easily see himself floating away.

She kept her hand on his chin. "I'm going to go try and wake Luke up. We're almost ready to head out."

He looked down at her, eyelids heavy, a smile tugged on his lips. More content than he ever thought he'd be in his life at such an ungodly hour. Maybe it was last night. Maybe it was the last seven years that had brought them to this point. This, being with Penny, was natural, the kind of natural that didn't usually come easy to him. His previous

relationships had started out with endless bouts of awkwardness. Where everything from the jokes he made to the text messages he didn't send were painfully misread. But Penny knew him, knew his humor, his past, the things he liked, his inconsistency and frustration with social media. She already knew all the little quirks that others found tedious. She knew those things, and incredibly, somehow, she liked him anyway.

They continued to stare at each other until a pretty flush stained her cheeks. He immediately swooped back in for another kiss. She swatted at him. "Would you behave?"

He grinned, because of the redness on her face, and because he honestly didn't think he could. Not when she was around, not with the ever-increasing knowledge of her he was hoarding away like a greedy dragon protecting his wealth of gold.

He finally let her go, reaching into the basket next to the clean drinking water where the toothbrushes had been stored during the trip. He watched her go while he uncapped the tube, squeezed out some paste, and then went to work on his mouth. He got lost in the mundane. The repetitive, mindless action he'd done nearly every morning his entire life. Time passed in a blur. Penny reemerged from the tent seconds later, and by that time his mouth was full of foam and was about ready to rinse.

She rubbed her hands together, giving him a sheepish smile as she approached. "Luke's not coming."

He sputtered, "*What,*" but with his mouth filled with soapy suds of paste that were basically frothing from between his lips, it sounded more like "WHAAOEHGETGHT?"

She grimaced, as if being the bearer of the news made her somehow complicit. "He's apparently too hungover to hike."

Alex turned his head as far to the side as he could to spit, doing his best to block her view of actually having to see it. When he was done, he brought the bottle of water up, taking



a swig and swishing it around in his mouth before spitting that out, too. "That's bullshit! Are you telling me if I would have gotten drunk last night, I wouldn't have to do this?"

Her gaze narrowed. "Are you saying you would have rather gotten drunk last night?"

The words came out sickly sweet, the kind of sweet that would rot your teeth the moment it passed your lips. He knew better than to answer. That was the kind of question Julius Caesar probably answered before he got knifed in the back. Even then, his answer would absolutely be "no." He would not have rather gotten drunk last night. Drinking was fun in the right situation, but hangovers were not. And Penny ... Penny was a revelation.

He rolled his eyes, fixing her with a look that both answered her inquiry and questioned her sanity before he made quick work of rinsing off his toothbrush. "What I'm saying is that Luke deserves punishment for over-imbibing; hiking would at least help him sweat it out."

Luke's hangover would also put them on a somewhat even playing field physically, and he wouldn't have to suffer the trip alone.

"If you don't want to go, you don't have to go," she said breezily, throwing on her backpack, a steely look of determination on her face. She looked as though she was going to single-handedly deliver the ring to Mordor. She would, too, absolutely. "I just figured you would have realized we'd have had an entire day together without Luke."

He blinked as the gears in his head started to crank and click together, the spokes aligning as they turned.

She continued, punctuating each sentence with a poignant break of silence.

"Alone ..." Pause.

"Just the two of us ..." Pause.

"Without a single person around for miles ..." Pause.

Her last sentence was delivered with a teasing look set on her face and a casual shrug as she turned toward the tree line. "I wonder what we could have gotten up to?" Then she turned, heading into the woods.

Alex had never moved so fast to catch up to someone in his entire life.



# Chapter 11

The hike started off relatively easy. Just a leisurely stroll along a few rolling hills of lush, green countryside. The trail was lined with massive looming trees that broke the filter of the sun. Golden patches of early morning light looked hazy as they wove through the leaves. The air was fresh, nipping lightly at his skin as they walked, and it felt crisp, easing in and out of his lungs. The birds chirped happily away in their perches, and he had to admit, he could see why people were so wild about this.

Alex could safely say he loved hiking.

He wouldn't be walking around in a North Face jacket eating quinoa anytime soon, but he could see himself doing this again. He liked the solitary quiet and introspection it provided. It was an opportunity to get lost in what was essentially a world of his own. A submersion into nature, the ultimate escape from everything making modern society suffocating.

That was, of course, until halfway through the hike. Where the easy slope, the picturesque trees, and the encouraging animals happily wishing them a good day disappeared and were engulfed in the fires of hell. The small hills and gentle grade turned into a mile incline, straight up, nothing but switchback after switchback. When they had gotten to the end of one, there was another, then another, until honestly, he thought they were on a hike that would never end. They'd just keep climbing up this cursed mountain until they eventually died, like some twisted version of camping purgatory.

He took it back. Everything he had said. Alex *hated* hiking.

It took nearly two and a half hours after they'd first set out from their camp for them to finally round the last bend to the lake. He was torn between wanting to praise the heavens it was over and choke on his tongue when the trees parted and the view became unobstructed. The lake they'd hiked to was nothing like the lake by their camp. This was glistening, clear. The water wasn't a simple blue, but a unique teal he'd only seen in photographs. It was immaculate, and the water, the mountains, the trees all looked untouched and pristine. He wondered idly how many people even knew this place existed. Probably not very many, and the revelation made the moment all the more significant. He wished he'd thought to bring his phone or an actual camera. He wanted to memorialize a place this peacefully enchanting. He might even brave the hellish nightmare of a hike to get here again. Well, someday.

Penny wasted no time when she reached the edge of the lake. She immediately set down her backpack on a large, flat rock. He did the same, dropping his pack and flexing his shoulders. She stretched, pulling her arms over her head, causing her sweater to ride up around her belly button. It took a considerable effort to tear his gaze away from her newly exposed skin to eye the line of trees. After what seemed like a gallon of water he'd had to drink in order to make it up here, his bladder was begging him to empty it. "I'm going to use the little tree's room," he said, motioning blindly to the side.

She fixed him with an amused look. "Little tree's room?"

"I figured it was better than saying I need to take a piss," he said with a shrug.

She immediately grimaced. "You're right. Little tree's room it is."

He tossed her a salute, shuffling off toward the woods and leaving Penny by the side of the lake. Once he'd done his business, and with his body much less uncomfortable than it had been, he took his time ambling back to the clearing. He

admired the foliage, the natural topography, the formations of the rocks.

When he finally emerged from the trees, he looked around for the familiar figure of Penny. She wasn't difficult to find with the contrast of blonde hair silhouetted against the crystal blue of the water. While he was taking care of business, she'd taken advantage of their surroundings and made a break for the lake. She was treading water twenty feet from the shore, smiling at him as he navigated his way back toward her around jagged rocks.

"Is it cold?" he asked offhandedly.

The answer, he was sure, was yes. The lake by their camp was cold, and this lake being at a higher elevation meant it was closer to the glacier it ran off of. The water was probably freezing, and he frowned a bit at the prospect of having to dive in. But if Penny could do it with the pretty smile on her face, he supposed he could make an effort to do it, as well.

Instead of answering him, Penny handed him a jolt as intense as the one he was going to get by diving in to join her. The water was shallow enough it came to just below her rib cage, the liquid licking at her skin as she stood to her full height. She looked perfectly comfortable for someone not wearing a bathing suit, and she definitely was not wearing a bathing suit.

She flicked her hair in a saucy wave that sent droplets cascading around her, ripples bloomed across the surface of the water from the lazy sweep of her hands through the liquid. "Why don't you come in and find out?"

Alex found himself tripping over his own feet for the second time that day after being sidelined by one Penny Foster. He couldn't get out of his clothes quickly enough. She grinned as she watched him hop on one foot, cursing as he tore his shirt over his head. Once he'd managed to divest himself of his clothing, he, with as much grace as he could possibly muster, flung himself into the water.

Cold assaulted him. No, assaulted wasn't the right word. Cold *castrated* him. It stole the breath from his lungs. When he surfaced, he swung his mess of hair out of his eyes with a heavy slap. He worked his way over to where she was floating with a few strong strokes of his arms. She, somewhere between his epic belly-flop and the attractive sputter upon resurfacing, had ducked her upper body back under the surface, probably because exposing her creamy skin to the still crisp air was uncomfortable enough to cause physical pain.

The second he got within reaching distance, he pulled her into his arms. She came willingly, locking her arms around his shoulders and fitting her body to his. He was a good six inches taller than she was, so he was forced to bend his knees into a full squat in order for the water to stay at his shoulder level. He prayed she couldn't see his dick through the unforgivingly clear water. It really was cold, and he didn't want to have to make awkward excuses for his size. Not that she hadn't seen it before, or touched it ... or well ...

Alex moved them into slightly deeper water until he didn't have to bend his knees any longer and he could support the infinitesimal weight of Penny with her arms wrapped around his shoulders and her legs wrapped around his waist. He held her by the small of her back, both hands spread wide on her slight frame. A wry thought welled up in his mind, he had to say it. "Thank god for Luke's unhealthy relationship with tequila."

She chuckled, leaning back and letting her body float in the water. It gave him an incredible view of her breasts with the blue water surrounding them, the brilliant green of the trees silhouetted in the background, the water lapping around the mounds.

When she straightened back upright, her eyes caught his. "Enjoying yourself?"

Was he enjoying himself? "Pen, we're both completely naked. I think that's the understatement of the century."

He pulled her in for a kiss, one she angled her head away from. He pouted and she rolled her eyes, adjusting her arms. They stayed pressed together in the lake, doing an intoxicating dance that consisted of bobs and weaves, of touches and turns, until Penny pressed her forehead against his, her fingers tugging lightly on the wet strands of his hair.

"What do you think? Worth the hike?"

His gaze dipped down to her lips. "Definitely. Do me a favor and remind yourself to never listen to me when I complain."

Her smile was incomparable. "Noted," was all she said before she angled her head the rest of the way down and pressed her lips to his. Their tongues tangled, their teeth clicking as the cool water lapped at their skin. It was soft, slow, but shockingly intense. When they broke for air, she was flushed and he was hard, despite the temperature of the water.

He wasn't surprised, that was just a side effect of being around Penny.

"You look cute all wet," she murmured. Her green eyes were dark around her irises, her face teasing and sure. He still couldn't believe he got to see her like this, that she was looking at him with evident desire shining in her overly bright eyes. If he'd known how he'd managed to do it, he'd have to try and give hopeless sods like him a chance by writing an article. Honestly, though, he had no fucking clue how he'd gotten so lucky.

"So do you."

Especially when he said stupid shit like that.

"I didn't mean it like that," she countered, her voice low, as she traced daring lines along the tops of his shoulders.

"Give me a break," he whispered huskily. Her gaze dipped back down to his lips. Was that really his voice? And how had this moment, a playful jab at the situation, turned into the fast track to seduction? "How often do I get to use a double entendre?"



“Mmmmm ...” she hummed, trailing her tongue along the ridge of her upper teeth before giving him a saucy look under lowered brows. “Fair.”

He kissed her.

This time it wasn't slow. This time it was hard—desperate. Penny tightened her arms around his neck, bringing her body closer to his, trapping his already very attentive erection between them. He responded by pulling her tighter against him, his arms reaching as far around her as they could go. He pulled away, only to move his head to the other side before he dove back in, capturing her lips in a bruising tangle.

Penny snaked one of her hands into his hair, tugging sharply and tearing an agonized groan from him. She captured her lip between her teeth, and he had to stop himself from groaning all over again. “I think there are a few things we could be doing where I'd enjoy myself even more.”

“I think you're right.”

He didn't know who moved first. Suddenly they were both making their way to the shore. To the two flat panels of rock where Penny had laid their towels out earlier to warm in the sun. There was nothing to step on to climb out, the water still waist-high, and he watched as Penny pushed herself on her forearms, doing an elegant turn and setting her bottom on the rock.

There was no way he was going to be able to do that as smoothly.

*Spoiler alert: He didn't.*

When he pushed up, he overcalculated the effort he needed and ended up smacking his face into the rock. Penny giggled at him as she settled her naked body onto one of the towels. His cheek stung and he rubbed it as he crawled his way toward her.

“The sun feels warm after the water,” she mumbled.

It did, but he couldn't focus on that, not when she looked like a mythical being laying amongst the wilderness. Her

golden skin glowing under the sun, her wet lashes dark and spiky as they lay against her cheeks. Her naked body was glistening, rivulets of water streaking across her skin. Christ, did she look good.

His earlier sentiment about her looking cute when wet came to mind, and he found he had grievously misstated the situation. "I take it back. Cute is not the word."

She didn't open her eyes when she responded, "Oh? And what is the word?"

He angled himself over her, lips trailing the line of her jaw, licking at the water droplets kissing her skin and nibbling on the column of her neck. "Fucking irresistible," he whispered into her damp flesh.

"That's two words."

"Both shockingly accurate."

She giggled, but only for a moment before his lips were on hers and he lost himself in the taste of her mouth, the velvet of her skin, and the insane chemistry that crackled between them. He could feel her soft, strong hands wind their way around his waist, tugging him the rest of the way on top of her. He went willingly. They were naked, they were alone, and he was goddamn going to take advantage of that fact.

Slowly, and with lazy purpose, he did what he hadn't had the time or the privacy to do since Penny had pressed her lips to his. He took his motherfucking time.

Alex spent an extensive amount of time lavishing hot licks along her neck, over her collarbones. Memorizing the dips and valleys of her shoulders, her neck. While his mouth worked, his hands explored, skimming up her waist, thumbs swiping over her nipples with light feathering strokes, down to knead at her outer thighs, her ass, pressing the hard line of his erection against her. She fisted her hands in his hair, trying to press his head down to the straining peaks aching for his tongue. Her body rolled, pressing up to bring their bodies together into a roaring frenzy.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Penny? I can barely hear you," he asked as he raked his teeth along the column of her neck.

She keened and pushed his mouth down to line up with her left nipple. He let his head lower slightly, but he didn't give her what she really wanted, what she was silently asking for. She huffed before she ordered, "Suck."

He inwardly delighted at her terse command. He moved down and sucked her nipple into his mouth, soothing the nub with his tongue before he pulled away with an audible *pop*. "Be loud for me, baby. I had to live with noise restrictions for days. I want to hear you."

She whimpered, and he dove back in.

His lips moved, working across her chest, over every inch of her body glowing in the midday sun. She let out a little moan as he leaned to the right, sucking her nipple into his mouth and worrying the pebble with his teeth. "You're skin's so soft. So sweet. I could spend hours kissing you here." He flicked his tongue over the peak, giving it a chaste kiss before moving to the other side. "Can I?"

"Please," Penny whimpered, her fingers curling into the skin of his shoulder. He could feel the small bite of her nails in his muscles and a stab of desire rocketed straight to his groin.

Alex let out a small, quiet groan. Slowly, as slow as he possibly could, he started to make his way down her body. He started small, with little licks between her breasts, making a sweep of his tongue on the underside of one, then the other. He followed it up with nips along the shuddering span of either side of her ribs. The entire time Alex worked her body with his lips, glided his hands across her. No longer shy, no longer unsure. It may have only been a few days since this whole thing had started, but he knew her. Not completely, not yet, but he knew she'd take everything he gave her and still want more.

He peppered tiny kisses onto her navel, moving in a circle around the quivering flesh of her bellybutton. When she was

expecting another quick peck against her stomach, he dipped his tongue into the small pit and was rewarded by a keen and an extra roll of her hips as she tempted him lower, faster. He bit at her hip bone, causing her to jerk a little before he soothed the sting with his tongue, following the crease down.

She fisted her hands in his hair, both pushing and pulling. It was as if she was unsure if she wanted to bring him back up to her mouth or push his head down to where she was aching for him. He shifted just a little lower, settling himself between her thighs, lining up his mouth directly over her clit. She swore quietly, and he grinned as he smoothed his hands up her legs, over her stomach, pressing her hips down flat against the rock, his thumb sweeping in a curve toward her center.

He kept his eyes locked with hers. Penny's cheeks were flushed, her eyes dark and wild with desire. He wanted to let her know, without words, without question, and above all else, it was her he wanted. Not just her body, it was her mind, her soul—all of her. When he finally let his gaze dip to between her spread legs, he couldn't help his groan.

He brought one of his hands down, tugging on the neatly manicured curls that ran along her opening in a thin line. "I like this," he murmured huskily. Her body strained against the press of his hand, her hips trying to arch up into his mouth. He blew out a hot gust of air along her, watching as her body quivered at the burst of temperature against sensitive flesh. "Look how pretty you are. You're making my mouth water." Her hips forced up hard, and he had to work to keep them down. "I can't wait to taste you."

"So do it," she huffed.

"Oh, I will." His voice belayed every filthy promise running through his mind. She was practically vibrating beneath him; but she wasn't quite as desperate as he wanted her, not yet. "I want to make sure you're nice and wet first."

"I am," she moaned, unwinding one hand from his hair to cup her breast. She looked like every obscene daydream he'd ever had. The fantasy woman he never knew he wanted and had been right in front of him. She played with herself while he watched, until she'd seemingly had enough of his inaction and the hand kneading her breast dove down between her legs to stroke herself.

He caught her by the wrist, chuckling darkly as he admonished her. "None of that now. Why don't I tell you what I'm going to do to you first?"

She took a shaky breath. "Alex, I swear to god."

He pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, mere inches from where she was wet and ready for him, from where just last night he was buried deep inside. "You're doing so good, baby. Shhhhh ..."

Penny moved the hand not in his hair and knotted it in the towel.

"I'm going to make you come so hard," he promised.

"Please," she begged, removing her other hand from him and balling into the fabric beneath her.

"With my tongue buried deep inside of you. Then I'm going to fuck you. Not soft this time. Not quiet and slow, but hard. Until you scream. I want it to echo off the mountaintops. I want it to make it all the way down to our camp. Can you do that? Can you scream for me?" Her shaking legs angled up to close around his head, but he pinned them back down. "I asked you a question, Penelope."

"I swear to god, Alexander, if you don't hurry up, I'm going to drown you."

He couldn't help but grin. It was the first time anyone had ever called him by his real name in bed. She was the first girl he'd been romantically involved with who even knew that Alex wasn't his full name. "Answer the question."

"Yes. Yes, I'm going to scream. I'm going to scream when I come."

"When *I make you* come," he clarified, because he really, *really* needed to clarify.

"Please. Please make me come," she whispered. Her legs were shaking, her chest rising and falling erratically. His eyes flicked down to her cunt and he could see a droplet of her arousal run down her opening.

"You're dripping." He brought one hand down, dipping his finger along her glistening sex and popping it into his mouth. "You're so wet, so keyed up. I bet the second I set my mouth on you, you're going to lose it."

"Alex." His name was a gasp, a beautiful plea he wanted to record and set as the notification on every device he owned.

"I can't think of anything I want more than for you to come on my tongue," he vowed with every facet of reverence he felt.

She was right where he wanted her—aching and desperate. But she wouldn't be Penny if she wasn't able to take the upper hand without even having to try. "Not even coming inside me?"

*Jesus mother fucking son of a bitch.*

He took a breath to steady himself. "Did you like that? Did you like when I came inside you?"

She nodded, fixing him with a look that would get him to do anything. Go to Tibet? Down. Wear matching Halloween costumes? Sign him the fuck up. He'd do it. Especially when she followed the look with, "Yeah. Do it again."

Here lies Alex Jonathon Jones, dead from Penelope Foster's filthy mouth.

He lunged forward, swiping his tongue along her sex. A quick flick, just enough to send a shock through her body, causing her to cry out and arch into his touch. His mind wandered back to their conversation about protection a few days ago. To the first time he'd made himself uncomfortable thinking about doing what he was doing to her right now. "I like that I'm the only one who's come inside this pussy."

When she recovered from the sneak assault, she brought her hand up to his face, gliding along his jaw, across his lips. He bit at her fingertips playfully as her lids dropped and she watched him through her lowered lashes. "Play your cards right, and I'll let you do it again."

His dick physically moved at the prospect of being buried back inside of her. "Yeah?" he queried softly, eyes flicking between hers and where he planned on spending an exhaustive amount of time exploring. "How do I stay in your good graces?"

"How do you think?" The words were clear, enunciated sharply. With no question as to what she wanted. If he wanted to fuck her again, he better put his tongue to work.

*Yes, ma'am.*

Without another moment's hesitation, he settled his mouth on her, his tongue lapping up her juices. He sucked her clit into his mouth, loving the small bundle of nerves with delicate pressure before he sunk lower and pressed his tongue into her opening. That was all it took to get her there. The second he thrust his tongue into her tight heat she was coming. It was an ascension the gods would envy, with the sun staining her skin, her legs shaking, her head thrown back, her voice echoing off the hills around them. She held nothing back, and he wanted to crow in response.

She cursed and praised him, urging him on until one orgasm subsided, rolled into another, and the whole process started all over again. He sucked on her until she pushed him away, until she'd had enough, and she physically had to remove him from her oversensitive flesh.

He made the path back up her body with the same slow care and attention as he made the descent. He wanted to feast on her. To bring her down, then quickly work her back up. It was a testament to her glassy eyes, staring directly at the sky. He liked her heavy limbs, sated with pleasure—pleasure *he* had given her. She hummed when he made it

back to her mouth and their lips met in a messy glide. "You are ... very good at that."

A small smile quirked at his lips. "Regretting not letting me do that last night?"

"If you would have done that last night, I can guarantee we would have been caught."

Her meaning was clear: if he had gotten his wish last night and had her ride his face, she would have been as gloriously loud as she'd just been when she came. Sure, there was no way they could have hid it from Luke, but he honestly couldn't care less at the moment. "Now I'm regretting not getting to do that last night."

Their bodies slid together as he timed the slide of his hips with the cadence of their mouths. They kissed with an easy sweep of hands along each other's bodies. Until the heaviness in Penny's limbs faded and was replaced by urgency once more. His head dipped down, tugging her ear between his teeth, flicking his tongue across the lobe and letting the pebbled texture abrade the sensitive skin. "On your hands and knees," Alex ordered, hot, insistent.

He pushed himself up, off of her, giving her enough room to turn her body around and into position. He surveyed the bend of her knees, the plant of her hands. His forehead creased as he focused back onto the points of contact. His knees were smarting from kneeling, and there was only a towel separating them from the rock. He bobbed to the right, grabbing his hastily discarded pants, then his shirt, folding them together into a makeshift pillow. She craned her head over her shoulder, fixing him with a confused look before he wrapped a single hand around one of her legs and lifted it, sliding the material underneath.

He just barely caught the brilliance of her smile before she looked forward. When both her knees were properly protected, he gave into his second observation.

Penny was on her hands and knees in front of him with her pretty ass in the air, her legs spread, and her pussy



exposed. "Look at you." He kneaded her ass hard, separating her cheeks. He bent down and pressed a tender kiss to the length of her spine. He glided his hands up her side while the other moved down to grip his length in his hand, pumping a few times. "Are you ready?"

A desperate noise tore from her throat as he pressed the tip of his length against her weeping opening. He slid himself down, not inside of her, but to massage her clit, enough to get him nice and wet. He played with her until he was sure he'd glide right in.

When he finally sank into her, they both groaned. Her inner walls spasmed around his length, hard—hard enough he felt it all the way out to the end of his hair follicles. He could feel everything, every inch of her, warm and hot, tight and sweet. "I've never felt anything as good as being inside of you."

She squirmed in a way that tore a glorious moan from his throat. "It's so good. You're so hot, so hard."

He bared his teeth, grabbing her hips tightly, denting his fingers into her supple flesh. He pulled back, then thrust in hard. A little cry escaped her, one that begged him to go harder, faster. His hips snapped into her, each thrust accompanied by a shallow grunt. She was mewling and crying as she pressed back into each one of his thrusts. The resounding slap of skin mixing with their cries sounded obscene. So dirty, but so fucking good.

He reached forward with his left hand, grabbing the wet tendrils of her ponytail and tugging lightly, a sharp contrast to the ruthless thrusts into her welcoming heat. Her head bowed back, her right ear rotating toward him. "Louder," he growled, hooking his hand on her shoulder to get more leverage as he drove into her with acute smacks.

She leaned down to rest her weight on an elbow, lifting her ass higher in the air and causing him to hit a deeper, sweeter spot inside of her. One of her hands disappeared

between her legs and he could feel the pressure from her hand working her clit.

“Oh god ... I'm gonna ... I'm gonna ...”

But that's all she was able to force out before he felt her inner muscles clamp down around his thrusts. Penny wailed as she came hard on his cock. It was a mixture between a scream and a song, and it was probably the most remarkable thing he'd ever heard in his life. Her arms gave out as she came apart in a stunning crescendo.

His head started to boil at the feeling of her orgasming around him, the view of her body in front him, the overwhelming pressure in his chest when he thought of her and all he could think to say was, “Oh fuck. Oh god ... Fuck.”

Then he followed her, emptying himself into her in heavy spurts. Everything went hazy as he lost himself. He stopped thrusting halfway through his climax, brain blank as his eyes dipped to where he was buried inside of her. He watched himself go, his dick flexing with each wave as he came deep inside of her, each spurt accompanied by a soft “uh” breathed through his open lips.

He stayed there, his chest heaving, his mind scattered to the four winds. He may need to go see a doctor because he wasn't completely certain Penny hadn't wiped his entire hard drive. It was taking an unnatural amount of time to recover his cognizant thought process. Right when he thought he'd managed it, the soft length of him slipped out of her and a dribble of his cum dripped from her cunt onto one of her thighs, and he lost it all again.

He swore. Filthy words dripping mindlessly from his mouth.

There was no manual on what was acceptable to say when seeing your cum dripping out of a pussy as beautiful as Penny's, and he didn't intend to write one either, he'd keep this image, this memory, this knowledge to himself. Between the two of them.

With shaky legs, she maneuvered herself onto the towel, turning slightly, shifting herself onto her back. He followed suit, a lot less gracefully than she managed but effective enough to nestle up next to her. It was a position they'd been in before, just from the opposite side. The crook she was nestled into was the side Luke usually slept on.

His lungs were still heaving, but he couldn't help but yearn for a smoke. After that ... he definitely needed a smoke.

"I know we talked about me saying this earlier, but I think you might actually be trying to kill me."

She smiled—brilliant, gorgeous, not even cracking her eyes open to look at him. His hand, the one not holding her to him, edged against the pillow he made for her knees, and he yanked it out from underneath him, stuffing it under his neck.

"In the future, I'll keep my hands to myself."

Now that would be a tragedy.

"Please, god, don't." She didn't respond, just chuckled against his chest. He smoothed his hand down her back, fingertips dancing along her spine. "You're incredible," he whispered against her brow.

"You aren't so bad yourself," she mumbled sleepily.

They laid there, with the sun warming their skin and the after-effects of phenomenal sex dusting their bodies. He let his eyes flutter closed and lost himself all over again.



# Chapter 12

He wasn't sure how long they laid there, but it was long enough he'd fallen asleep. Between the hike, the water, the sex, and waking up early, he was fairly tired, if not self-proclaimed exhausted. The opportunity to nap was a godsend. Penny's naked body draped across him, all sleep heavy and perfect, definitely aided in his decision to stay exactly where he was. The uncomfortable slab of rock notwithstanding.

He had finally come back to consciousness but hadn't gotten the motivation to actually move. He hadn't been this content in ... He wasn't sure he'd ever been this content. The quiet, the girl. Would there ever be a day in his life that was better than this? He honestly didn't think there would.

He pulled Penny a little tighter in his arms, squeezing as he angled his head to press his nose into her limp and tangled ponytail. Even after everything they'd done, she still smelled wonderful. That faint tendril of bluebells clung to her skin and he steeped himself in it. He trailed his fingers lightly down her back, skimming along her sun-warmed skin. Penny moaned, her body shifting slightly as her eyes blinked open. With an adorable scrunch to her nose, she lifted her head and stuck out her lower lip.

It may have been the only time he'd seen Penny wake up and not be insanely chipper. He chuckled, pulling her closer, letting her cheek pillow back onto his chest. "I fell asleep," she mumbled tiredly.

"Me, too," he hummed. He looked up at the wisping puffs of clouds floating peacefully overhead. "I think this might be the best day I've ever had." She didn't respond, but she pushed herself up, bringing his face down to her for a sound kiss. A thought bubbled up in his mind, and it quickly found

its way out of his mouth. "Can I ask you something?" His gaze dropped to the small freckle on her right shoulder and he pressed his thumb against the little mark, stroking over it with long, sweeping caresses. "How long have you been thinking about ... this?"

There. He'd done it. He'd said exactly what had been niggling at him without any near-catastrophic results. He hadn't fumbled his words; he hadn't said the wrong thing. He'd said exactly what he meant. Even motioning between the two to further enunciate his point.

She pushed herself a little farther upright so that she was braced over the top of him. He dropped his hands to her waist, fingers spread wide as he held her steady. "That's a loaded question."

Was it? He thought he'd done rather well. "Why?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because you want me to embarrass myself by telling you how long I've liked you!"

"That long, huh?" He hadn't meant it to sound as sarcastic as it did, but being the antagonistic little shit he was, it came out that way anyway. She huffed, immediately moving her hand down to pinch the skin on his elbow. Which he hated, by the way. She knew he hated that. He squirmed trying to pull his arm away. "I'm kidding! How about I embarrass myself first, huh?"

Her gaze narrowed. "Okay."

He took a massive breath, pulling as much air in his lungs as he possibly could before blowing it out in a rush. He fixed his eyes back on the clouds, it seemed easier to admit things if he didn't have to look directly at her. Not that he had any reason to be nervous—it was Penny, after all.

"The first day."

She immediately perked up, drawing his gaze back to her. "Really?"

He felt heat stain his cheeks as he shrugged. "Yeah."

She shook her head in disbelief. "I thought you hated me!"

How in the world could anyone actively hate her? How could a guy meet her and not immediately want to get to know more of her? She looked shocked, as if she couldn't believe he'd been denying his feelings since the very first day they met. "I thought you were there to fuck Luke. I didn't hate you, I was just annoyed at the situation."

She wrinkled her nose again. "Gross."

"Very. But I remember thinking it was a shame you were there for him."

This time it was she who flushed, the pink staining high on her cheekbones. She ducked her head away from him. "That's sweet. Almost sweet enough I can forgive you being so surly the first time we met."

He'd give her that, it wasn't as if he hadn't looked back on their first meeting and wanted to absolutely skewer himself for his idiocy. "All right, what about you?"

"Honestly?"

"No, make something up," he deadpanned.

She leveled a mock-serious glare at him. "Stop being sassy."

"I don't think I can."

She pursed her lips, ignoring his teasing jibes and settling her body onto his. Her naked breasts pressed down flat against his chest and he lost focus from the words dripping from her mouth, he almost didn't hear her answer. "Remember the Christmas we all spent at college?"

His mind flew backward. To a snowy day in a shoebox apartment, with the smallest Christmas tree known to mankind, and more food than anyone knew what to do with. Except him, of course, he'd eaten the shit out of it.

"Ummm ... yeah. Junior year I think."

"You and Luke came over for dinner, and even though you guys definitely were not on board, you still dealt with my extremely long list of Christmas traditions. At the end of the night, before we watched *The Grinch*, I gave you guys your presents and you were so upset that you didn't think to

get me something. That out of everyone, I didn't get a present that day."

A strangled laugh escaped him because he remembered that day, remembered the painful way his heart constricted when he'd opened the pair of gloves she'd gotten him. Not only because he'd lost his other ones a few weeks back and she remembered, but because they were nice, nicer than any set he'd ever gotten before. Nice enough he could wear them both on his motorcycle and off.

He'd felt the guilt immediately. She had not only included him in her Christmas plans and set up a day where he got to relax, eat copious amounts of delicious food, and hang out with two people he genuinely liked, she'd been thoughtful enough to get him a gift, as well.

"So, you like me because I was a jerk to you?"

"No." Her green eyes danced with something he couldn't quite place. "I like you because every Christmas after that, or birthday for that matter, you've always made sure you had something for me, even if it was small."

His heart clenched painfully. "I'm going to have to seriously work on raising your expectations about how people treat you."

She graced him with a smile that he didn't think he'd ever get used to having directed at him. "I think you are already doing a pretty good job of that."

They looked at each other for a long time until Penny broke the silence. "I'm getting hungry. I brought Luke's lunch, do you want to split it?"

He shook his head in disbelief. "Penny, I think you ought to just marry me already."

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He hated the prospect of leaving their small slice of heaven, but when the sun began to hang heavy in the sky above them, he knew they had to get going. He and Penny had had



sex again as they lounged by the lake. As slow and intense as it had been the first time, except she was on top and had ridden him until he forgot everything, including his name. His heart burned with something he couldn't place, something he'd never experienced, as they came together. If he had to wager a guess, he'd call it passion. Yes. That was the word—passion.

With their clothing back on and his mood magnificently lifted, they made their way down the mountain. He stopped to kiss her constantly, mainly because he could. It was also because she was letting him, and they were going back to a place where he couldn't. Faux secrecy aside, even if it were out in the open, he wouldn't be able to kiss and touch Penny as much as he'd like. He didn't fancy an audience. Even one he'd known as well as Luke.

The hike downhill was infinitely easier than the hike up had been. The concentration on placing his steps made the task much less tedious, as he had something to focus on other than walking for an interminable amount of time. Before he knew it, the trail had leveled out and they were almost back to camp.

He stopped her, pulling her into his arms for another kiss. She folded seamlessly into his arms, tucking against his body as her lips met his. He'd never get used to this. Ever. He'd never get used to being able to kiss her, to hold her. That she wanted him, too. He almost wanted to hike back up the mountain so he could do something as insanely clichéd as shout it from them.

Instead, he traced the angle of her jaw with his knuckles, admiring the stunning lines of her face. "Let's tell him," he murmured.

Her eyes searched his for an indeterminate second. "Okay," was her response, and his heart soared. When they finally managed to break apart and move into the clearing, it wasn't to see the crackling of the fire or a hungover Luke

lying about lamenting his life choices. It was to see nothing at all.

The tent was gone. The fire was out. The baskets and utensils were put away. The only thing left at the campsite that even signaled they were in the right place at all was the station wagon sitting where it had been parked.

Luke came into view seconds later, his face severe and somber, the skin under his eyes tinged and sallow. "Thank god you guys are back."

"What's going on?" Alex asked, his brow creasing as he hastened a look between Penny and Luke.

"We've got to go, there's been an accident."

His brows flew to his hairline. *An accident? What kind of accident?*

It was Penny who spoke next, her voice tight, her expression unsure. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Luke fixed them both with a grave look, bracketing his hands on his hips as he steadied himself for the words he was about to say. "Jason's dead."

\*\*\*\*\*

Jason Rosewood was Penny's brother-in-law. Alex had never met him, but by the nature of sheer proximity to Luke, and in turn Penny, he'd heard of Jason. The repercussions of the man's entry into the Foster family were infamous. Jason was the reason one of the perfectly molded Foster girls became a teenage mother. Jason was also one of the reasons why Penny's mother was an overbearing harridan.

If the horror stories were to be believed, and he'd met Alice Foster, he definitely believed them, the downfall of Polly had resulted in a firmly regimented prison sentence for Penny. Despite the hellacious demands of her matriarch, Penny seemed to genuinely like her brother-in-law, and small-town scandal or not, there was no artifice in the tears that were running down her cheeks in the front seat.

She was quiet—too quiet, without music or conversation. The only thing he could hear was the small click of the keychain against the ignition and the purr of the engine as the car raced along the deserted highway. Occasionally Penny would let out a snuffle, and each time he became more and more uncomfortable with her not being next to him and him not being wrapped around her, soothing her, kissing the tears from her cheeks, giving her any iota of comfort he could possibly give.

When a particularly jagged hiccup escaped her lips, he slid forward, bringing his right hand up to grasp her shoulder. It wasn't much, just the smallest of squeezes to let her know he was there and he'd do anything to help. Without looking at him, she brought her hand up to cover his. He pulled her closer, so that he could lean his head against hers. He wished he could pull her into the back seat, into his lap, into his arms.

He looked up to see Luke staring at them quizzically. Alex swallowed and focused back on Penny, who was trying to burrow closer to him.

They'd have to talk later.

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When they got to Rosewood Manor it was late. The sun had sunk beneath the horizon and most of the lights of the massive, looming house were extinguished. Alex also marveled he was legitimately visiting a place called Rosewood Manor. The house itself fit the name, too. It was huge, monumental, and no family in their right mind would be able to use all of the space inside. It was completely, utterly, and extravagantly ostentatious.

The minute the car pulled to a halt, and without a backward glance, Penny bounded into the house to find her sister. Alex watched her go, and with tired limbs, he exited the car and went to the back of the station wagon. Luke

followed suit, his car door slamming audibly in the quiet countryside. He fought the urge to yawn as he grabbed his bag then immediately grabbed Penny's, throwing them both over his shoulder.

Luke stalled his hand in mid-air as he stared at the two bags hanging off Alex's back. "So, what was that?"

Alex's hackles immediately rose. He fought the urge to give in to his instincts and become immediately defensive. "What?"

"You know what." Luke motioned to the front door where their female compatriot had disappeared through only a minute earlier. "Are you into Penny or something?"

"No ... I mean ... yeah ..." He scrunched his eyes shut, swallowing thickly as he tried to get the words to assemble correctly in his head. "We're kind of ... together."

"Kind of?" Luke asked, his voice sharp. Alex's shoulders stiffened; he couldn't stop it. "Since when?"

"It wasn't until we got into the woods. We've been trying to tell you ..." His voice trailed off. True, they had been keeping something from Luke, but it had only been for a few days ... They were going to tell him. They were always going to tell him.

"Jesus, Alex," Luke swore, palming his hand over his face.

Anger at his friend's reaction welled up inside of him. "What?" Alex spat.

"Do you realize how fucked this is?"

And because of who Alex was as a person, he let his emotions, the ones roiling around in his stomach, the little fissures of doubt and uncertainty, take over. "Why is that? Seems to me it has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me? You're both my best friends," Luke stressed. He looked tired, and the feeble way he threw his arm out in emphasis only hardened that fact.

"So?" Alex crossed his hands tightly over his chest. His brows lowered in a glare. There was no way to misread his

body language. Luke knew him too well, knew his reactions, how he dealt with things.

So, Luke being Luke reacted exactly the way he always did when Alex started to get worked up—he tried to talk him down. “So? What if this doesn't work out, Alex? What if you break up? I literally cannot choose a side. Between either of you. I can't choose. I won't do it. I refuse to do it.”

Alex took a step forward, words dripping like venom from his lips. “Who says we're going to break up? Huh? Are you trying to say something?”

“What? No! Fuck.” The redhead lifted his hands between them; a gesture to show he didn't mean any harm. “This is what I'm talking about!”

“If there's something you want to say about me being with Penny, say it.”

Alex was waiting for it. He was waiting for Luke to say exactly what he'd been thinking for the last week.

“No. Don't you fucking dare do this to me. Don't you dare pull this ‘You aren't good enough for her’ shit with me. I've seen you do it every time anything remotely good happens to you, and I won't let you do it. You *are*. You are good enough for her, but she's also something special, she deserves something great, and if you can't give it to her, I ... fuck... Everything I say right now you're going to take wrong. I want to protect you both, don't you get it? It's my job to protect *both* of you.”

Alex's teeth ground together. “What do you mean, Luke? You're doing great”

He might as well have punched his friend right in the face. “Fuck this and fuck you. That's unfair and you know it. I'm going to bed. See you in the morning. Come talk to me when you've calmed down.”

Then Luke was gone, slamming the hatch of the station wagon closed and disappearing into the house.

Alex squeezed his eyes shut. He cursed himself, cursed the day, cursed Rosewood Manor and the crickets that had

no right to be chirping so fucking loudly. He let a harsh, bitter laugh escape him as he shook his head. He shouldn't be surprised. It wouldn't be him if he wasn't able to completely mess things up.

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When he woke up the next morning, he was alone and painfully disoriented. He wasn't surprised he was alone, he was pretty used to that, but he was surprised he was in a bed, in a bright red room, with a functioning cell phone on the nightstand next to him. It took him a long series of moments to remember what brought him there. First Penny, then the death of Jason Rosewood, and then, of course, rounding it all off with the spat with Luke. He grappled for his phone, bringing it up to hover over his head as he unlocked the screen like it was a novelty. After a little over a week in the wilderness, a mattress and a functioning cell phone threw him for a loop. He was a New Yorker for god sakes, he should be able to adjust to anything.

There were a series of notifications he hadn't bothered to check last night when he plugged it in to charge before crashing face-first into the pillows. Mostly from his author's Twitter account and, shockingly, even a text from Vivian wishing him luck in the woods. Other than that, his phone had been silent while he'd been gone. Though, the two people he talked to most were with him during his technological blackout, so he didn't feel all that terrible about not having a phone bursting with notifications.

Alex looked at the other bed, the one that had held a bulky redhead hours earlier. No, the phone wasn't a reason to feel terrible, but his conversation with Luke the night before was. He probably shouldn't call it a conversation. It was more like strongly worded questions that were, in turn, met with self-destruction.

Why the fuck was he like this? He was honestly asking. Someone explain it to him.

The last situation he was equipped to handle at the moment was meeting Penny's family head-on, potentially as her boyfriend, without the support of his best friend at his side. Jesus, what would Penny say when he told her? She'd likely be furious at how sheerly idiotic he'd been and strangle him out of principle.

It wasn't Luke's fault Alex was a neurotic spaz. It wasn't Luke's fault that Alex had picked up the misinterpretation of a question and ran screaming for the hills with it. He needed to apologize. Hopefully today if he had the chance.

His first priority was to find Penny and make sure she was okay. He hadn't seen her after they were ushered in by a sinister-looking butler and were led to their room. The man had taken Penny's bag, but he hadn't seen hide nor hair of anyone other than Luke since they'd arrived. She was probably making sure her sister, her mother, and her niece and nephew were all right.

His eyes flitted to the right-hand corner of his phone screen. The time was nearing ten o'clock, and everyone would have most likely been awake for hours. He was thrilled he got to take an actual shower with hot water and would no longer have to submerge his body in subzero temperatures in the name of hygiene.

When he was showered and dressed, he wandered his way out into the hallway of the manor house. He quickly got lost in the housing equivalent of a shopping mall. There were dozens of rooms and hallways and a place that looked like an actual department store. The only things missing were the helpful signs with a facility map that said "You are here." It took him twenty minutes to locate another human being, a fidgety looking maid who looked a cross between shifty and terrified. She pointed in the direction of the pretentiously named "Great Hall," and he slouched his way through the gleaming tiled hallways toward it.

The “Great Hall” was a heaping, massive room—its ceilings nearly twenty-five feet high. He took in the opulent surroundings as he crossed the threshold. Crimson silk lined the walls, the crown molding was a rich mahogany elaborately detailed with gold leaf, and the tile gleamed from the sunlight filtering through the massive floor-to-ceiling windows. With a wry smile, he marveled it had taken him so long to find this place. He should have felt the disapproval and general distaste for anything and everything remotely like him from miles away.

Inside the “Great Hall” was the nation-state of his worst nightmares.

A gaggle of brunettes, all either sitting or standing perfectly upright littered the expensive furniture around the room. Each of them stone-faced and stiff-lipped—except for one. A stunning young woman wearing a full-length white ball gown had thrown herself into a heap on the ground in the center of the room and was weeping uncontrollably.

And they called *him* dramatic.

In the very corner of the scene, on a smaller couch than all the rest, sat Penny, her hand gripped tightly with Polly’s. Their faces were solemn but still composed, and he took an easier breath knowing she wasn’t overwrought with emotions. Polly seemed to be doing well considering her circumstances. Her eyes were puffy from crying, but she was silent as she sat with her sister. Twin pictures of grace and humility surrounded by decadent excess. Alice was hovering behind the couch, looking out one of the massive windows with her nose turned to the air.

The desire to slink backward overwhelmed him. He imagined doing that, in a pink panther tiptoe that would somehow end in a comical disaster. His head dipped to his chest in preparation to shuffle away; but before he could dip completely out of sight, Penny’s eyes met his across the room. She whispered something to her sister. Penny pulled



her into a quick seated hug before hopping up from the couch and making her way over to where he stood.

A few of the Rosewoods shot disinterested glares his way. The girl on the floor clawed wildly at Penny's legs as she passed. Penny, with as much poise and grace as she encompassed (which was an infinite amount), swiftly dodged the grab and continued on her way toward him. When she reached him, she wrapped her hand around his forearm and tugged him out into the hallway. Once they were safely out of eyesight, she kept moving until she folded her arms around his waist. The area around his heart warmed, and a small smile twitched at his lips as he pulled her tightly into a hug.

He angled his head so that his cheek pillowed against her hair. "How are you?" he asked softly. They were far enough away that the fair-skinned group inside wouldn't hear them, but he found himself lowering his voice nonetheless.

She sighed heavily. "Better now."

"How's Polly holding up?"

She shrugged, a single raise of her right shoulder. "As good as she can be. With Charlotte, she hasn't had a lot of time to grieve."

"Is that the soprano reenacting the final scene of Anna Karenina in there?"

She looked up at him with a little smile tugged at her lips. "There isn't a train."

*Come on, baby. Work with me here.*

"This whole situation is the train."

"Train wreck more like it," she deadpanned. His smile widened, his stomach tightened as the words whispered through his mind, *That's my girl*. She looked up at him for a few moments, small smile quirked on her lips before her face dropped. "I'm sorry we weren't able to finish out the trip. I know you were counting on it."

"Hey, whoa. No. This is way more important than a book, okay?" His brow creased as he spoke. How could she

possibly think he would be thinking about his book at a time like this? This wasn't about him; she didn't need to worry about him right now. "Look, I know things are going to be crazy right now, and I don't want you to worry about me on top of everything. You need to be here for your family. Why don't I head back to the city?"

The words turned to ash in his mouth at the prospect of heading back to the city without her, without Luke.

She broke across his thoughts. "No. I want you to stay. Please ... stay."

"Okay." He pressed a kiss to her forehead, one hand lightly cupping the nape of her neck and holding her to him.

"Luke and Dad are watching the kids. They don't understand why everyone is sad, and Charlotte has just been upsetting them. They're in the nursery if you want to go say hi."

Normally, he would say yes to that offer, but Luke and he weren't in the best of places right now and, honestly, even with Penny's brave face, and even though he was sure she could handle things, he didn't want to leave her alone. "I'd rather stay with you, if that's okay."

Her arms tightened around his waist, and he let himself revel in the feeling of her in his arms. He didn't want to complicate things for her. This wasn't the time, so he'd tell her about Luke and everything later. Right now, he'd just be here for her. Right here.

"Penelope?"

His head snapped up to the severe figure of Alice Foster looking at the intertwined figures of Penny and Alex with visible distaste. Her lips were pursed, her arms crossed over her chest. Slowly, methodically, and with every indication she was planning his homicide, she took in every detail of his character from his worn boots to his rumpled clothes.

It was clear as day. Alice Foster did not approve.

Penny didn't jump away, didn't nervously fidget the way Alex most certainly wanted to under the shrewish woman's

penetrating gaze. She simply leveled a disinterested look at her mother. "Yes?"

"Your sister needs you."

Penny didn't say anything else, just disentangled her body from his, all except for her hand, which she used to tug him along into the belly of the beast.

Alice Foster had never looked so furious. He wanted to grin so badly it hurt him not to.



# Chapter 13

If he thought this place was a madhouse before, he was absolutely one hundred percent right.

Charlotte was something else. Mr. And Mrs. Rosewood were robots. The other uncles and aunts didn't seem to care someone had actually died, except for their not-so-subtle inquiries on who would inherit the business now that the heir presumptive was dead. The Fosters, in a rare moment of alternate reality, looked demure and tasteful under the watchful eye of their dragon matriarch. This place was wild, man. Completely wild.

Alex and Polly had talked briefly. She thanked him for being there, apologized for being a bother, and asked him about his new book. He did his best to give both her and Penny his full attention. He asked them if they needed anything, and because he couldn't think of anything else to do, kept them both distracted—not from their grief, mind you, but from the sideshow that was happening around them.

After another hour and a half of racking sobs, Polly announced she needed to go look in on the children, and Penny, with a communicative look, agreed it would be best if they went with her. He nearly sighed in relief. The energy he'd expended simply being in these people's company was enough to give him a social hangover. He didn't hang out with this many people very often. He really didn't hang out with people like this for a reason. He was going to need a week of isolation in order to recover.

Once the news was acknowledged and made its way through the room, they were interrupted by the now-vertical figure of Charlotte, who in an effort of great burden, turned to face them. She sniffled, fluttering her too-long-to-be-

natural eyelashes at them as she prepared herself to speak. "I'll show you to the nursery."

Penny's voice, dripping in sarcasm, replied, "Polly lives here, Charlotte. I'm sure we can find it." Alex had to stop himself from grinning. From pulling her into his side, pressing his lips to hers, and giving her an epic high-five in the center of the nicest room he'd ever been in.

Charlotte ignored the beautifully delivered blow, turning to a side table and picking up an ornate candelabra. "Follow me."

He shook his head in amazement. Who in the fuck were these people? Did she not know it was early afternoon? And as cutting as a figure as she made leading three people wearing casual jeans and shirts down the posh hallways, train of dress flowing and unlit candelabra held high, it didn't change the fact that it was batshit crazy. Batshit. Fucking. Crazy.

The children weren't in the nursery, and once Charlotte realized she wouldn't be the center of attention for much longer, she begrudgingly left them to "freshen up." Polly led them down a staircase, out a set of double doors and into an overly landscaped backyard. From there it was just a matter of moments to find the group out by the gardens. Penny's dad and Luke were attempting to entertain the kids with a mock game of soccer. A game that included the eight and five-year-old fighting each other over a kicked ball.

"Grandpa, Grandpa, watch," the little boy screeched as he swung his leg as hard as he could. He smacked the ball, but it didn't make it far. His mind raced as he tried to place the little boy's name. What was it? He knew that both Penny and Luke had told him it before. Daaaaannnnngggerrrr? Drrrraaaaa ... co? Deeeeeeee ... Denver! It was "Denver!"

Penny lifted a single eyebrow as she side-eyed him. "Why are you shouting?"

Had he said that out loud? He shot her an apologetic look. "Sorry, I forgot his name."

“Denver and London,” she said softly, squeezing his forearm lightly and moving forward to talk to her father.

Alex and Luke’s eyes met. He gave his friend a small, sheepish smile. Luke immediately turned his back on him. He was clearly still angry, and Alex didn’t blame him. Seeing as it didn’t look like he was welcome with the adults, he was going to go play with the children. It seemed like the safest option. He moseyed toward where the two were battling, shrieking as they ran after the checkered ball. They stopped when he approached.

“Hello,” the little girl greeted shyly. She was the spitting image of her mother. Blonde, fair-haired with bright blue eyes.

He smiled. “Hi there. Can I play with you guys?”

“Sure!” the boy said, kicking the ball toward Alex. Sports probably weren’t how he was going to put his best foot forward, but he may as well try it. He swung his foot forward, kicking the ball with a small tap on his foot. It went pretty much nowhere.

“You’re bad at this,” Denver said plainly, though he looked more than a little pleased he wasn’t the only one who was sports-deficient.

“I am, but I’m good at other stuff.” He bent down, seating himself crisscross on the ground. The children followed suit, bringing the ball but fixing their curious gaze on the stranger.

“Like what?”

“Creative stuff. I’m good at writing.”

London’s eyes lit up. “Like Aunt Penny?”

He couldn’t help but smile at the girl’s obvious enthusiasm at the mention of her aunt. He wasn’t so certain he didn’t do the exact same thing when Penny came into his line of sight. “Kind of. Aunt Penny is better.”

“Aunt Penny’s the best.”

These kids had it figured out. “That’s true,” he agreed with an amused chuckle.

London's face fell a little as she looked behind him. He followed her gaze to the group of adults all standing with somber faces. "Mommy's really sad. She keeps crying. They won't tell us why, but something's wrong."

"Yes, she is. I'm sure they'll tell you when they are ready."

Denver *hmped*, crossing his arms over his chest. "They're acting like we're babies. We're old enough to know what's going on."

He knew where this was going to go. The kids, with their cute faces and big, blinking eyes were going to try to get information from him, and he was going to fold like a house of cards. He needed a distraction, something, anything. His eyes bobbed to the entrance of the garden. "How about we do something to cheer her up?"

"Like what?" London asked, shifting up onto her knees.

"I've heard that flowers are always a good idea."

The kids' faces lit up as they put two and two together, and as sneakily as they could, they left the group of adults behind to escape into the garden.

*Spoiler alert: It wasn't sneaky at all.*

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By the time they were found, they had an arm full of flowers. More flowers than they probably needed, and enough he was going to get yelled at for destroying a section of the Rosewoods' prized gardens, but the kids were happy, and he was sure Polly would at least smile. It wasn't really his fault they'd picked so many. He hadn't thought his whole distraction plan through. At what point did he think he could successfully wrangle children? One he might have had a chance, but two?

There were flowers in his arms, flowers in his hat, a flower behind London's ear, even a broken flower hanging out of Denver's pocket.



He was sitting on the ground again, watching as London agonized over the next flower to pick. "That's probably enough ..." he suggested, eyeing the lot currently overflowing his arms. London immediately picked another flower. "Or not."

Denver squealed, "Aunt Penny!"

He turned, a sheepish expression on his face as the two kids abandoned flower-picking and left him with the evidence. "What's all this?"

"We're picking flowers," London chirped as she clung to Penny's leg.

"I see that."

She lifted an eyebrow at him in question, and he shrugged. "We were trying to cheer up Mommy."

"She's going to be so surprised!" London was nearly bouncing out of her skin, and he couldn't help but smile at her childish enthusiasm.

He shuffled, trying not to drop any of the massive bouquet as he rose to his feet. "How about we cheer up Aunt Penny, too?"

Denver seemed horrified. "Aunt Penny, are you sad, too?"

She fixed her nephew with a fond smile. "A little."

He ambled the rest of the way toward the connected group, kneeling in front of the kids to offer the wealth of flowers for their inspection. "Which ones do you want to give Aunt Penny?"

They labored over the decision for long enough that Alex sent a playfully irritated look at their aunt. She didn't return it, instead, she looked happy, her eyes a little wet. His brow furrowed in confusion, but the kids' plucking fingers brought his attention back down. When they'd finally chosen their flowers, they presented them to Penny with expectant faces.

She beamed at them. "They're beautiful. I love them. Thank you, bug. I'm going to take them home with me and dry them so that I can keep them forever."

The kids preened at the praise. Until realization dawned they could be getting equal if not greater praise from their mother. "Let's go give the flowers to Mom!" Denver shouted, turning and racing out of the garden. London followed her brother immediately.

"Well ... duty calls," he drawled, motioning to the blooms in his arms. He took a step to follow the kids, but that was as far as he made it before he was being pulled down. Penny's mouth met his in a hard kiss. He sunk into it.

There were flowers in between them and he couldn't just drop them like he wanted to and kiss the ever-loving daylights out of her. Not when there were two expectant children waiting for him to deliver their picks to their mother. She pulled away, looking over his face, his hat, everywhere. "Thank you."

He shook his head a little as he gave her a bewildered smile. "For what?"

She reached up, tapping at one of the flowers in his hat. "Being you."

His lips curved, his eyes dropping as he gave her a playful eye roll. "That's the first time I've ever heard that." She leaned up, pressing another soft kiss to his lips. He shook the bouquet in his arms. "You're distracting me, woman. I have a very important job here."

She raised her hands up in mock apology, but the smile never left her face.

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They spent the rest of the day outside, soaking up the sun and "entertaining" the children. Without joining Penny and Polly on their infinite trips inside, he knew hanging out with the kids was infinitely preferable to whatever the Rosewoods were up to. Much sooner than he expected, dinner was announced, and the small group that had been outside all had to pull up roots and brave the indoors. According to

Penny's father, Jim, dinner required an outfit change, and after realizing none of their trio would have anything "acceptable" to wear, some clothes were located for them in the Rosewoods' creepy dungeon vaults. Apparently, they kept city hours here, and, because Alex didn't live in Regency England, he didn't know what that meant. Turns out it meant they were eating at seven.

Luke and he had gotten ready in silence. Alex still hadn't gotten the courage to apologize, and instead of extending him an olive branch as Luke normally would, he was sticking firm to his guns and staying quiet. Alex would try again later, after they'd had dinner. He'd pawed through the clothes he'd been given and promptly ignored everything except for the slacks and the button-up white shirt. He even left his collar open and rolled the sleeves up around his forearms.

After all, they could take the boy out of the trailer park, but they couldn't take the trailer park out of the boy.

When it looked like Luke was done getting ready, he motioned toward the door. "Good?"

Luke nodded. "Yeah," then took off out the door. Alex supposed it could have been worse. They walked in silence in the direction of the "Great Hall," where presumably there was a formal dining room around somewhere. Luke led the way, and it only took a few moments before they entered the room and were directed to their seats.

As if this house of horrors couldn't get any worse. His seat at dinner happened to be right across from Alice. The only bright side to this entire situation was that Penny was at his left and across from her sat Luke. He wasn't delighted his two best friends had to share in his suffering, but he was grateful he wouldn't have to do this alone.

Penny looked stunning. Not that she didn't in the woods when it was just her and her freakish survival skills, but the addition of the floral blue gown and the light dusting of

makeup gave her a moonlit glow. “Nice suit,” she murmured so quietly he almost didn’t hear it.

He angled his head toward her, sending her a mischievous look. “Suit, what’s that?” He leaned forward, bringing his mouth inches from her ear and continued in a low voice, “You look beautiful.”

Her lashes fluttered. A small flush stained the top of her cheeks. They were pulled apart a moment later by the food being served. As crazy as this place was, his mouth immediately started to water at the sumptuously prepared roast, perfectly plated with mashed potatoes and roasted asparagus. He picked up his fork, about to dive into his plate and then possibly ask for another serving when his attention was pulled away by a sharp voice. It rang, shrill and expectant around them. “Penelope.”

His fork stalled in mid-air as he watched Alice Foster, with a distasteful purse to her lips, reach across the table, pick up her daughter’s plate, and replace it with a plain, undressed salad. The group of four sat silently until it was broken with a voice as fake as any he’d ever heard. “Your figure.”

He stared forward in disbelief. The fuck did she just say? The FUCK. Did she. Just say?

He felt like the heat of his gaze could have bored through the woman in front of him. A satisfied smile twitched at the matriarch’s lips as her eyes met Alex’s triumphantly. Penny’s gaze was fixed on her plate, but his focus moved past that, to where her hands were balled into fists in her lap. He lost it.

“Penelope,” he said loudly—too loud. He kept his eyes on the woman he wasn’t certain gave birth to two children or just willed them into being. It was a silent battle of wills. A battle for the very soul of the woman next to him. “That salad looks ...” He stalled, letting his eyes move away from Alice to fix on Penny. “Delightful. In fact, I can’t imagine not eating one right this second. You don’t mind, do you?”

Without an affirmation, he picked up his plate, switched it with hers, and then stared directly at Alice with a look that clearly said, "Try me, bitch." Unnatural silence hung between them, broken only when Luke piped in. "You know what, I'll have one, too." He motioned for a hovering server who immediately scrambled to fill the request, and then Luke promptly slid his plate in front of Penny. "Penelope, would you be a dear?"

A wicked smile spread across Alex's face. Penny's cheeks were flushed, but she kept her head down. With a flourish, he reached out and wound the hand not holding the fork through hers. He pulled it up to press a kiss to the back of it before uttering a loving, "Eat up, baby; you're looking a little thin."

He stabbed his fork violently into his salad, shoveling a heaping forkful into his mouth. It tasted like dirt, but he kept his gaze hard on the woman across from him.

*Say something. I dare you. Say something.*

Penny proceeded to pick up her fork and take a tentative bite of food. The protective set of his shoulders eased as she gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and then released it to pick up a knife and cut into her meat. Luke, with an equally smug expression, took his first bite of the newly acquired salad. His jaw stalled for a long series of moments before he allowed himself to chew, slow enough to let anyone looking at his face know just how bad it tasted. The two men's eyes met across the table, and a knowing look was shared between them. They might not be on the best of terms at the moment, but they were both there for Penny, and with that in mind, they were on the same side. A side defined solely as anti-Alice.

Dinner was silent between the four from then on. With a fuming Alice, a smug Alex, and a suffering Luke, Penny at least seemed to be enjoying herself. He could tell by the upturn to the corner of her mouth and her sparkling eyes, she was quietly pleased. The small smile she tried to force

down wouldn't quite go away, and it made him unnaturally happy.

He managed another bite of bland lettuce. It still sucked.

Just to add insult to injury, and he wanted nothing more than to piss Alice off, he slouched in his chair, arm slinging low around Penny's waist. It was the least proper thing he could think to do. His mind raced at what else would prove how woefully uncultured he was. Should he show off the tattoos? Should he talk about his run-ins with the law?

Penny hadn't even finished the full first plate when she set down her fork. She motioned the second toward him. Alex shook his head, and nodded to Luke, who gratefully took back his dinner. He hoped there was at least room service in this monstrosity of a house because there was no way he was willingly eating another leafy green as long as he lived. He abandoned his plate with a heavy sigh.

Penny leaned back in her chair and sat a single hand on one of his outstretched thighs. She dipped her head to the side, pressing her mouth to her shoulder as she looked at him through the dark fringe of her lashes. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. He knew.

Dinner, he thought, had been a resounding success.

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The Rosewoods, in an attempt to further the ideals of 1950's gender segregation, had invited the men for brandy and cigars. As much as a drink was warranted (Hornitos, he was looking at you), he couldn't muster the energy to join in the charade. He and Luke had both declined, and instead, the trio headed back toward their rooms. Penny was staying just down the hall from them, and she happily linked her arms through both Luke's and Alex's as they left the dining room.

"I don't know what I'd do without you guys."

Alex gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. He hoped they'd be able to spend some time together. That he and

Luke could clear the air. That Penny could be told Luke knew about their newly established relationship, and that Alex had, in turn, been an asshole, and maybe their vacation, even though it was out of the woods, would get back onto its previous trajectory. One where they all liked each other and Alex wasn't frothing at the mouth from uncertainty. But, of course, the universe conspired to stop anything good from happening.

"Penelope." They all stopped. He squeezed his eyes shut before they all slowly turned to look behind them. Penny's mother was standing in the hallway, chin lifted as she looked at the group. "A word please."

Luke stepped away from Penny, but Alex stayed right where he was. The swelling feeling he'd felt earlier, the overbearing urge to protect her was simmering in his stomach. He wanted to dig his heels in, to make it very clear he wasn't going anywhere if Alice's intention was to make someone as sweet and wonderful as Penny feel like less than everything she was. Penny's soft hand against his cheek was the only thing that stopped him from telling Alice to "get rekt."

"It's all right. I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

He hesitated, only long enough to send the demon masquerading as a mother a warning glare. Penny leaned up, pressing a quick kiss to the side of his mouth before turning to confront her mother. Her shoulders were squared, her fingers were loose and hanging at her sides, and he could tell she was prepared for battle.

*Give her hell, baby.*

Luke and he walked on in silence. Alex's stomach was roiling as he thought about Penny, her mother, this place. When they got to the room, he realized he and Luke still hadn't said a word to each other. He'd been so lost in his thoughts he'd nearly forgotten his friend was with him. The one he cared about just as much as the woman they'd left behind. Alex needed to apologize. They needed to talk.

Instead, he forced out a strangled, "Thanks." Luke looked up, his brow knitted in confusion as he undid the cufflinks at his wrists. Alex waited for a beat before he continued, "For having my back out there with Penny."

Luke pinned him with a meaningful look. "You don't have to thank me. Penny's my best friend."

That's why they were here in the first place. They were *both* his best friends, and all Luke had ever done was steadfastly, and resolutely, do his best to protect them both. Even from themselves.

"I know she is. I know."

It wasn't an apology. It wasn't the conversation they should ultimately be having where Alex groveled and they bro'd it out with a manly hug. It was a step toward understanding. It was a step for him to kick the door wide open and just get it off his chest. He let the words run through his mind.

*Luke, I'm sorry about last night. You were right—about everything. I'm a fucking miserable idiot, but you know that; you had my number before I did. You already knew I was going to self-destruct, and I did, and I took it out on you, and it wasn't fair.*

He opened his mouth, but not before Luke cut him off.

"I'm going to take a shower," the redhead grumbled, tossing the dress shirt onto the bed and shuffling toward the en suite bathroom.

Alex watched Luke go. Silent, disappointed, but it seemed his friend wasn't quite there yet, and if he owed Luke anything, it was time to work things out. Alex nodded. "Yeah, man," then proceeded to shuck off his clothes and toe his way into his trusty grey, faded, and most-likely older than both Rosewood twins combined, sweats. Mindlessly, and in a way he hated already felt routine, he plugged in his phone and burrowed his way under the covers.

Even though the full bed was soft, he couldn't help his wistful thinking about the tent. Someone document it



because those were words he never thought he'd say in his fucking life.

It wasn't the tent, per se, it was just that in the tent he had Penny by his side, in his arms. The tent was where he got to hold her while she slept, where he'd watched her cry, where he'd watched her smile, the first place she'd pressed her lips to his. He tossed and turned, his mind racing over the events of the week. Each day playing like a movie in thorough and painful succession. He tossed until Luke came out of the bathroom and got into his own bed. He tossed as he thought of Penny post-civilization—of her hands balled into fists, of leaving her alone with her mother, of her sadness over Jason's death, even of her smiling at him in the garden.

He couldn't take it anymore.

With a huff, he flung the blankets off of him, not even caring to check behind him to see if Luke was asleep, as he made for the door in search of Penny.



## Chapter 14

When he knocked on Penny's door, it was light and tentative. He hoped she wasn't already asleep. Even in his desperation to see her, he couldn't stomach the idea of stealing into her room like some epic creeper. Dating or not, the whole midnight breaking and entering thing was not his kink. Doors were boundaries, and if she didn't want to see him, he'd make his way back to bed.

He was relieved when the door handle turned with an audible creak and she pulled it open. Except he really wasn't all that relieved, because even in the familiar pajamas she'd worn throughout the trip, her face was wet with tears, and he felt his heart plummet into his stomach. "Oh, baby."

She blinked, her wet lashes sticking together. She didn't hesitate and moved into his arms.

He held her close, petting a hand over her head, burying his nose into her tangled curls as she sniffled into his chest. He walked her backward, just enough to get her into her room and close the door behind them. He made delicate paths along her body with his hands, swaying slightly as he soothed her with his warmth, his body, and his whispered assurances.

She sniffled. "Why is it that you always see me at my worst?"

"Since I don't believe that exists, I wouldn't know."

She laughed, a short humorless bite that left a hollow feeling in his stomach. He was grateful when her shoulders started to ease, when her sniffles subsided, and her body molded to his. She pulled away, raking the backs of her hands over her cheeks. His gaze devoured the underside of her palms. The skin was the same, unchanged.

*Good. Good.*

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” The way she said it, it was like she was assuring herself more than him. He angled his head, raising his eyebrows expectantly. He waited for her to give him a real answer. Not the one she’d been programmed to give every time something went remotely pear-shaped. Her gaze dipped. “I’m going to be okay, really. I just needed to cry it out. I haven’t since I’ve been here, and with everything with Polly and my mom, I just needed the release.”

He pulled her a little tighter against him, pressing a kiss to her forehead as his lips rasped along her skin. “Cry it out. I’ll be your personal Kleenex.”

“I’ll get your chest all slimy.”

He shook his head. Like that mattered at all. “Then slimy it’ll get.”

“I feel better already. Maybe we could just ...” She dropped her head back, her eyes darting toward the bed.

As much as he’d dreamed of getting Penny between the sheets, and believe him, over the past week it was definitely a dream he’d had—often—it wasn’t like this. He gave her a small smile as he moved his thumb to dry some of the tears on her cheeks. With the feeling of his fingers, she seemed to realize the state she was in. Her chin dipped as she took a step away from him. “Let me get cleaned up.”

Honestly, he didn’t care if she were clean, dirty, or covered in BBQ sauce. He just wanted to hold her.

She disappeared into the bathroom, and he took a deep breath as he let his eyes bounce around the room. Lush, thick velvet hung from every available surface. The curtains, the canopy on the bed, the fabric of the chair. The Rosewoods didn’t stop their nauseating display of wealth with the exterior, it dripped off of every piece of furniture and fabric encased in the manor house.

He shook his head and moved toward the bed, sinking down to sit on the edge as he waited. It took five minutes for Penny to exit the bathroom, and when she slipped out the

door her face was clean. She looked unsure as she approached him, her hands clasped together tightly in front of her bellybutton. It was almost as if she had something to tell him, instead, she asked meekly, "Are you hungry? I know you didn't get to eat a lot at dinner. I can run to the kitchen."

His brow creased. He motioned for her. "Just ... come here."

She did, settling herself in between the V of his outspread thighs. He didn't waste another second, he enveloped her in his arms. As she sunk into him, he spent a few minutes pulling her close, shifting them back until he leaned against the headboard and she was splayed across him. Slowly but surely, she melted further into him. The tension easing from her shoulders as he trailed his fingertips along her skin. A myriad of questions raced through his mind on overdrive. "What did your mom say to you?"

Penny nuzzled a little closer, notching her forehead under his chin. "Nothing that she hasn't said before. I'm wasting my life, making terrible choices, a disappointment, just to name a few."

That. Fucking. Woman. He knew she'd pull something like this. He just knew it. After all, when they'd all graduated from college, it wasn't Penny who received the accolades for her accomplishment. No, Alice made such a scene about where they were sitting that Penny, the person who everyone was there to see, faded into the background.

He ground his teeth. He was glad Penny wasn't looking at him, because he doubted he'd be able to hide how he was feeling. Namely, he was very close to plotting an elaborate scheme in order to annoy the ever-loving shit out of her mother just for the hell of it. "I take it I had something to do with that. I'm sorry if what happened at dinner caused problems."

"Please don't be. My mother has no concept of reality. She doesn't know you. She doesn't know me for that matter

either. She wouldn't know what's best for me if it hit her in the face."

Now that was an idea. "I volunteer."

This time she did look at him, tilting her head up to admonish him. "Alex!"

"I'm kidding." And because she was there, in his arms, and he could, he dipped his lips down to press a chaste kiss on hers. "Or am I?"

She rolled her eyes, then righted herself so that she laid back across him. "I'm sorry. This is probably the last place you want to be."

"Penny. Stop. I'm glad I'm here."

Her voice was quiet when she responded, "Me, too."

He tightened his hold around her. She seemed reticent to talk about her mother anymore, and she was probably just as hesitant to talk about Jason with everything else going on. Somehow, without thinking, his brain determined it was the perfect time to bring up their current situation. "So ... everyone knows now."

The second the word left his mouth he winced. *Nice one, Jones. Well done.*

"They do. Relatively painless, right?"

"Right." The word was an affirmation; the agreement to what she'd said. The way he said it, however, contradicted the meaning entirely.

She twisted in his arms, moving so she no longer laid across his lap and was straddling him with either one of her knees pressing into the pillows. Her gaze was narrowed suspiciously, and she read each one of the features on his face with calculated thoroughness. "Why did you say it like that?"

Fuck. This was exactly what he didn't want. This wasn't the time, or the place, to get into his messed-up relationship history and his propensity for driving people away. He swallowed thickly. "It's nothing; we'll talk about it later."

Penny wasn't taking "no" for an answer. "No! What's going on?"

He brought his hands up to her bare shoulders, letting his palms glide along her arms as he forced a calmness to his voice. "Pen, look, right now isn't about me. I want to be here for *you*. The other stuff ... it'll work itself out."

He was certain of that. Not today by any means, but Luke was his best friend (and the human equivalent of a golden retriever), and when the time was right, they'd both hash it out.

"No. I'm not overcome. I'm sad, sure. Upset, obviously. Angry at my mother and this whole thing ... yes. But I'm not incapable of hearing the truth."

He shook his head. "I'm not saying you are."

"Then tell me. Us, dealing with and navigating this, is probably the most normal thing I have right now."

She was looking down on him with her long, dark lashes and pretty pout. The light was haloed behind her head, and it made her skin glow. He would have willingly surrendered his soul to her if she'd asked, so telling her what had happened last night was the least he could do. "Luke kind of confronted me last night ... about us."

Her nose wrinkled as she considered his words. "I figured; he mentioned it to me this morning."

Did he now? Alex's mind raced to what Luke might have said. Had Luke told Penny about his meltdown? Did Luke give Penny the same warnings he'd tried to give him?

"Oh?" he asked, doing his best to sound nonchalant.

*Spoiler alert: He, in no way, sounded nonchalant.*

"I told him I was a big girl, I appreciated his concern, and I was more than capable of having an adult relationship with someone I've known for a long time. That whatever happens, I care about both of you and that isn't going to change."

*I mean, I guess if you're the wonderful witch of the woods, with unnatural baking abilities and a terrifying*

*knowledge of weaponry, then things like words and delicacy are something you are capable of achieving.*

"You did monumentally better than I did." He laughed humorlessly. She frowned, a small wrinkle settled between her nose again, and he reached up to rub his fingers across it. "I may or may not have accused Luke of not wanting us to be together for a laundry list of reasons, most prevalent being that I don't deserve you."

"Oh, Alex. You didn't."

Oh, he most certainly did. "Definitely not one of my brightest moments."

Penny moved her hands up, lacing them behind the back of his neck. Her chin lowered as she shot him a serious look. "How could you possibly think that? Luke loves you. He would never ..."

"I know. I know he wouldn't." Luke was too good for them all. Alex had known that since he had somehow been adopted as one of the redhead's friends. They had nothing in common, were hardly anything alike, and yet, Luke hadn't given up on him when Alex had tried to pull away. Not when he learned about Alex's family or his weird habits. Still hadn't after every shitty thing he'd done. Alex honestly thought Luke never would. "I guess ... I'm just waiting for someone to say it."

"What?" she queried softly.

He wasn't looking at her, and she shifted his head so he was once again looking into her eyes. He wasn't ready for this conversation, the one where he'd unload a wealth of baggage on her about his own insecurities. He owed her an explanation, just as he owed Luke an explanation, and if he wanted to keep her, he was going to have to ignore every single one of his baser instincts. The one telling him to shut up, to misdirect the conversation, to run away.

"Penny, you are light-years out of my league, and if Luke knows it and I know it, eventually you're going to realize it,



too. I just ... I don't want to fuck this up, and I am already, sheerly by being me."

"Oh my god, Alex. Are you kidding me?" She seemed angry, and he squeezed his eyes shut as his body revolted from her tone. Was this it? Had he just set off the lightbulb for her? There was quiet, but he didn't open his eyes. Not until, in a stern, very un-Penny-Foster-esque voice, she commanded, "Look at me."

He did. She sighed, looking at the ceiling as if she was about to ask the Lord what she was going to do with him. "You are in a manor house with the nightmare that is my extended family. If the Fosters weren't enough of a handful, you are willingly dealing with the Rosewoods, who to even my standards of dysfunction, are next level. You haven't complained for a second. About any of it. You willingly took on my mother, as my boyfriend. I've never dated a guy who's met my mom and actually continued to date me afterward, let alone stood up to her. Trevor lasted an hour before he broke up with me."

She laughed, a bitter laugh that seemed to continue her sentiments. "Alex ... you know about my hands, and the way I handle stress, which is in no way healthy. You know I am insanely competitive, and type-A, that I like things a specific way and I get irritated when they aren't. You know all of that, and you still look at me like I'm something special."

He exhaled a shaky breath as he watched her inundate through her thoughts. As if she was the lucky one, as if it was her who had won the jackpot in romantic partners and not the other way around. Didn't she know? Didn't she realize what she was?

"You are sweet and kind and thoughtful. You make me laugh. You're successful, you're smart, and loyal. If anyone in this relationship is undeserving, which neither of us are, it would be me."

Never. This woman deserved the very stars delivered to her on one of the Rosewoods' massive silver platters. His

hand found hers, giving it a light squeeze. "You know none of that matters to me, right? The family, your hands. None of that make you any less extraordinary."

"I think you should listen to yourself more. You deserve me, and I deserve you. Okay?" Was that okay? Well, he was choking back tears, so he would say that that was pretty okay. "And Luke deserves an apology."

He swallowed thickly. "Also true."

"You know, I like you a lot. So, you're just going to have to deal with it."

A low laugh escaped him, and he pulled her closer so that her arms wound tightly around his neck and her chest pressed firmly against his. "I don't think 'like' is quite significant enough of a term. I think I a little more than like you, Penny Foster."

She smiled, and slowly, the emotions choking him, gnawing at his insides subsided. "About time. I've been waiting forever for you to admit you 'a little more than like me.'"

He shot her a poignant look. "Are you saying you've known I've liked you all this time? Because if I'm not mistaken, you acted pretty surprised the other day when I told you I'd liked you from day one."

She looked around, innocent as a newborn babe, except for the mischievous smirk tilted on her lips. "I had a hunch."

"Next time, tell me. It'll save both of us years."

She smiled, the soft smile he'd become accustomed to in the last nine days. The one that turned his insides to goo; and if he were being particularly selfish, which he tended to be more often than not, the one he felt like she reserved just for him. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers and letting himself get lost in her intoxicating embrace. Their mouths parted in tandem, and with a blissful sweep, his tongue met hers. He groaned lightly at her taste, knowing even if they hadn't already had sex, if it wasn't an option,

he'd be more than happy to simply kiss her for the rest of eternity.

Penny unwound her arms from around his neck, but their kisses remained steady. She glided her hands along his throat, down, over the exposed skin of his chest, scratching lightly at the definitely not-defined muscles, before diving toward the edge of his sweats. He pulled away with a gush of breath. "Whoa. We don't have to ..."

Her lashes fluttered. "I know. I just ... We're in a very comfortable bed, in a very comfortable room, with actual privacy for the very first time. I don't want you to think I don't want to."

He shook his head, making sure her eyes were locked with his when he responded, "Penny, sex isn't the price you have to pay for my kindness."

He was expecting an acknowledgment. A concurrence to the very accurate sentiment that somehow seemed to be overlooked in modern society. What he didn't expect was for her to laugh, her white teeth curving like a blade from her place on top of him. "See? You say stuff like that and I want to even more."

He quirked his brow at her. "Do feminist ideologies do it for you?"

She bit her lip, looking at him with the look that made him have to think of some pretty disgusting things in order to keep the lower half of himself under control. "Absolutely."

His gaze lowered back to her mouth, to the plush, kiss-bruised petals that were slowly but surely leading him toward insanity. In a low, husky voice, he murmured, "Interested in my opinion on the wage gap?" She leaned into him, the sultry vixen, brushing her breasts against his chest and making him forget he was trying to be a gentleman. They had plenty of time, the rest of their relationship, in fact, to spend the night tangled in sheets. He cleared his throat and pushed her slightly away. "I'll keep that in mind, but not tonight. Just let me hold you."

She nodded, and together they wiggled their way beneath the sheets. It was their first night sleeping together in a bed, their first night sleeping together alone, and for the first time since they'd arrived at Rosewood Manor, he thought they might actually really be out of the woods.

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He was probably dead.

*Goddamnit*, since Penny pointed out his propensity for assuming his demise, he couldn't help but notice when his brain revolted to the macabre.

Death would make sense because he could safely say he'd never woken up in the state he was currently in. That state was pure, unaltered paradise. He was harder than hell, wrapped in warm bliss, and it felt really, *really* good. He groaned as consciousness seeped over him. He thrust his hips lightly into wet warmth and his eyes popped open to take into account the early morning light.

What he found was what every teenage boy's nocturnal emissions were made of. A blonde knockout, half-dressed, in his bed, with her lips wrapped around his cock. He blinked a few times, trying to allow his brain to catch up. Penny stared up at him, all wide-eyed and innocent as she slid all the way down his shaft with a firm suction.

"Jesus. Fuck. Yes," he murmured as she bottomed out. Her mouth was sucking with an ungodly perfect amount of pressure. He flexed his hips in time with her movements, reaching down to feather his fingertips along the side of her face. He cursed and praised her, cursed and praised deities he wasn't sure actually existed. Until he was babbling like a lunatic to the tune of, "Oh god, baby. I'm gonna come."

He expected her to stop. To move up his body and give him a kiss with that clever mouth of hers. She didn't. Once he told her he was close, she hummed around his shaft and it sent him straight through the atmosphere into outer

space. He came so hard he felt his release in his spine, and Penny, incredible, insatiable, incomparable Penny, took every last drop. She sucked him through it until he finally crashed back to earth and was staring at the ceiling with his eyes blinking and his chest heaving.

"Holy shit," he muttered, making Penny chuckle as she kissed her way up his body. By the time she got up to his mouth, a brilliant smile was spread across her face. She settled along his side, hand on his chest. He quickly folded his arms around her, letting his hands glide along her skin and over the thin fabric of her pajamas.

"Good morning," she purred, her eyes dancing mischievously. The cadence of her voice was electric, like a pretty song she was whispering for his ears only. He angled his chin up and pressed a light kiss to her lips.

"I need you to tell me if I'm in a coma, and this is just the product of my immobile mind. I'm pretty sure being woken up by head only happens in fantasies or porn, and there is no way I am this lucky."

She let out a husky chuckle and his dick twitched in response. It was all the proof he needed he could be a step away from death and still want this woman. "I hope not. I have plans for you."

His eyes dipped down the cut of her tank top hiding the soft swell of her breasts. He slid his palm down the curve of her ass, roughly cupping an exquisite cheek. "Like what?"

She turned coy and danced her fingers along his collarbones. "I'm comfortable, and warm, and lying in bed with a wildly attractive author I plan to ride until I can't see straight."

He grinned. "I'm at your disposal, milady, but I have to say, you have shockingly high confidence in my rebound time."

She hummed again, sliding her hand from his chest to his chin, bringing his lips to hers. "I'm sure I can think of a way to properly inspire you."

She licked into his mouth, and his toes curled. He groaned. "I think you're right."

Conversations devolved into kissing. Long, slow drags of lips and tongues from desperate mouths. He took his time savoring her, memorizing her, marveling at how beautiful she was, how lucky he was to be here with her, how sweet she tasted, even this early in the morning.

His chest burned in a passionate plea to meld with hers. Her body rocked in time with his, and slowly but surely, his arousal roared back to life. The hard length of him pressed against the inside of the thigh hooked over his hips. When he was finally ready for her, he threaded his fingers into the waistband of her shorts and worked them off between lush kisses and her revolving hips.

The golden light of the sun highlighted her curves, bathing her in golden iridescence. She looked every bit of the angel he knew her to be. She circled her hand around the base of him and brought him to her entrance, and he skimmed his hands up from the outstretch of her thighs to the curve of her waist. She sunk down on him, and a soft "uh" escaped him as he reveled in the feeling of being inside her. She rocked her hips experimentally, tilting so he slipped out of her an inch. His grip on her hips tightened, and he watched with hooded lids as she planted her hands on his chest for leverage.

"It feels really good like this. Do you feel how deep you are?"

His head grew hot, and he sucked in a shaky breath. "Fuck yes."

She smiled, all the while rocking with the unhurried sway of her hips. "Do you want me to go faster?"

"No, baby. Ride me slow. I want to watch you."

She did, prettily and patiently, over and over again. He pressed when she pulled, gripped hard and guided as she slowly built them to their peak. All the while he watched her. He watched her bite her lips to contain her moans, watched

every flicker of pleasure that washed over her face. Every time with her seemed to be more all-consuming, more soul-shattering than the last. He was certain it wouldn't matter how many times they came together, it would never be boring, never be enough.

He skimmed his hands from her hips to her breasts, kneading the swaying globes in time with her rocks.

"Mmmm, yeah. Make me feel good," she whispered.

He squeezed hard. "That's all I want. I want you to feel good. I want you to be happy."

She leaned forward to press a kiss to his lips. He deepened it and took the opportunity to wrap his arms around her, increasing the pace of his thrusts with the new angle. "You do make me happy."

His chest was burning and she was getting closer. He could tell by the erratic rhythm of her body and their occasional clash of teeth. Her breathy moans had turned to full out whimpers and where before she'd been happy to slowly build them toward their completion, now she was frantic. She tore her mouth from his and sobbed, "More. Please, god, more."

"Anything. I'll give you anything." He anchored his hands on her hips and thrust up hard. Again and again until she was tumbling over the edge. Her fingernails raked over his chest. The most beautiful mashup of expletives dripped from her lips. He followed her with a guttural shout, his body pulsing as he emptied himself within her. When he came back to himself, Penny was draped across his chest.

"What time is it?" he asked quietly, eyeing the faint glow outside the window.

"Six-thirty, I think," she mumbled into his chest.

*Jesus Christ*, it was only six-thirty in the morning and he wasn't even mad about it. He pressed a light kiss to her damp brow. "You know, I'll never forgive you for making me a morning person."

“When did I do that?” she asked, lifting her head to look into his eyes. Her gaze was droopy and satisfied and wonderful.

He let out a little laugh. “When do you think?”





# Chapter 15

The exodus from Rosewood Manor wasn't nearly as dramatic as literally every other moment they'd been there. They left before breakfast—after Penny had said her individual and private good-byes. They loaded the car and were on the road in no time flat. It was unnaturally quiet as they navigated their way back to Frank's house. The radio was off, the keys tapped against the ignition, and the tension was so thick he was surprised they weren't all choking on it. It was awkward, and he hated every minute of it.

After a good twenty minutes that may as well have been twenty hours, Penny huffed, turning her body with a jerk and shot stern glares at both Luke and him. "You guys are being stupid. Would you just work it out already?"

Silence hung between them. His eyes flicked to the back of Luke's head. He could see the tips of his friend's ears had started to turn red, which tended to happen when Luke was embarrassed. Luke shouldn't be the one who felt embarrassed. All of this was the result of Alex's inferiority complex. If anyone should be uncomfortable, it should be him. Lucky enough, he totally was.

Penny's reminder from last night popped into his mind. "*Luke deserves an apology.*"

He did. He *really* did, and as high of an esteem as he held for Penny, that apology needed to be in private. He'd talk to Luke just as soon as he could find a moment to get him alone. "Well?" she continued sharply.

"Okay," they both muttered.

"This whole thing is ridiculous," she bit out with a bitter huff.

"Penny, calm down, yeah? We'll get to it, but not in a car with you trying and failing to pretend you aren't listening to everything we're saying," Luke answered.

Her mouth pursed sourly. "I wouldn't listen if you didn't want me to."

"Yeah, and the sky is green," Alex deadpanned, shaking his head in time with the jangle of the keys.

Penny's eyes narrowed at them and a smile tugged at Alex's lips. His head fell back to rest against the seat.

After another five minutes of shooting coded messages through the force of her glare, she got sick of their silent stubbornness and turned the radio on. The music helped, not only because it drowned out the violent screaming in his head, but because it also prompted Penny to softly sing along. Her voice was wonderful, but who could be surprised?

Sitting behind Luke, he had an unobstructed view to watch her bob her head along to the string of upbeat eighties jams cycled through the radio. Her voice would dance over the words with her pretty lilt. He could watch her singing from the backseat all day.

*Fuck, was he a sap.* The kind of sap whose lashes were now three times as long with hearts in his eyes. The kind who sighed dramatically every time he looked at his girl. He fucking loved it.

He loved watching her, loved being able to openly appreciate her. He even loved it when she caught him staring and shot him a dirty look before she fell back into the verses.

They made it to Frank's house within an hour, and once the car came to a complete stop and the ignition was turned off, they all simultaneously unbuckled and headed for the hatch. Luke got there first, silently throwing his bag over one shoulder and tucking two of the camp chairs under his arm. He didn't stop to say anything, to issue instructions. He didn't even launch into pleasantries about the drive, Penny's singing, or that Alex hadn't asked them to stop for food. He headed straight into the garage.

Alex sighed, grabbing his own bag with a shake of his head. Penny immediately took it out of his hands. He

wrinkled his brow in confusion as she set his bag firmly on the ground and waved at the garage. "Go and talk to him!"

Well, yeah, he should probably do that, but avoiding conflict was kind of his thing ... so ...

"Penn ..." he whined. If a whine could be manly, which he thoroughly believed his was.

She wasn't having any of his pouting. She pushed him forward, then thought better of it and swung one of the supply bags at him. "I'm not letting either of you go home until you talk. So, go."

He dropped his head, blowing out a gust of breath as he inspected the bag he was charged with carrying in better detail. It was the fucking tent. *Of course, it was.* He saw a startlingly clear picture of his future flash behind his eyes. A headline: *Moderately famous author dies from freak tent mishap. His stunning girlfriend is devastated.* Then there would be a picture of her, and the world would forget he existed when they looked into Penny's eyes.

He entered the garage and was greeted by rows of neatly organized shelves filled with every single tool known to exist. Luke's father owned a construction business, and although the garage was where he kept most of his company's equipment, there was still a little nook in the far corner where a makeshift recording studio had been built. It wasn't much to the naked eye, but Alex knew Frank had converted it the day after Luke told him he wanted to pursue music instead of taking over the family business. Alex knew how much that corner meant to Luke because he was his best friend.

That, and it was firmly established that Frank Browning was the greatest father known to mankind. Not a connecting point, but something he was reminded of every time he thought of Frank. *Oh, Frank (the greatest father known to mankind), had made this studio for Luke.*

That was his thought process. It really was.

His gaze bobbed from the makeshift studio back to Luke, who was standing by one of the workbenches, carefully unloading a few supplies. Alex took a steadying breath before he asked, "Hey. Where do you want this?"

He lifted the tent for Luke's inspection. Luke barely looked at it.

"Yeah, over there." The redhead motioned toward an empty shelf, and Alex immediately swung the tent up and onto it. Luke wasn't cutting him any slack, not that he deserved it, and he hesitated as he stood there awkwardly. He was getting "*Just go—we aren't talkin'*" vibes, but he had come here to "*get it over with,*" and honestly, if he didn't "*just do it*" he'd spend the next three years awkwardly tiptoeing around his best friend. It would definitely make the Monday friendship dinners Penny insisted on having a fucking delight.

He needed to do it. He was going to do it. He was pretty sure.

Alex took a heavy inhalation of breath. "Look, Luke, I'm sorry about what happened the other day. I'm sorry for how I handled all this. I just ... well, you know. Which isn't an excuse! There isn't an excuse for how I acted. I fucked up, and you were right about everything. Right about what you said about me, and Penny, and right to be worried." He finished his speech with his right hand rubbing the back of his neck, trying and failing to ease some of the muscles that had locked up.

Luke unloaded a bundle of bungee cords a little more forceful than necessary. "It's still fucking bullshit, you know?"

"I'm not saying it's not. I'm an idiot." Luke threw him a sharp look for the barbed self-insult. Self-deprecating humor was not the way to go apparently. "You're my best friend, and even when I was saying all that stuff about you being jealous, I knew it was wrong. You wouldn't do that to anyone, let alone to me. I knew that before I said it and it still came

out. I'm just hoping you can forgive me. I really do get all the stuff you said about Penny. I get you're in the middle of things, and whether any of us want it, it could cause problems at some point. I don't want it to, but it might."

Luke let out a little huff, crossing his arms over his chest. "Well, you aren't the only one who could have handled the situation better." Alex's eyebrows rose in surprise. Luke rolled his eyes in response. "Look, I just worry. You've both been through a lot, and I don't want either of you to get hurt. Especially by each other."

"I know."

"It doesn't mean I don't think you guys will work out or are bad for each other," Luke continued.

"I know. I know!" Alex reassured, his palms flat and facing out. It wasn't sarcastic, it wasn't a joke. It was the truth. Was he growing? Was this what growth felt like? He'd have to ask Penny, it was all very unclear.

While he was off on another internal tangent, his friend kept talking, adding on to his previous sentiment. "Honestly, thinking about it a little more, I kind of get it."

It took him a second to catch back up to the conversation. Alex's brow crinkled. "What?"

"That you guys work. I didn't understand it at first. I think I was still in shock when it happened because you are you, and I figured you'd probably die before you'd ever make a move."

Alex nodded in agreement. After all, he'd never thought he'd make a move either. If his unconscious sleep-snuggling self hadn't done it for him, he'd probably still be single. His face fell again. Wait a minute. Had Luke known that Alex had a bit of a thing for Penny this whole time, too? Had he known Penny maybe had a bit of a thing right back? Or maybe the real question was, why hadn't Luke told him?

"It really made sense after seeing you guys at dinner last night. She forces you out of your self-imposed exile to

socialize and you stand up for her when people take too much.”

A pleased smile tugged on his lips. He blinked a few times, a warm pressure inflating his chest until he felt like he was going to explode all over Frank’s garage. “Thanks, man.”

“I’m still going to have to kick your ass if you break her heart. Fair warning.”

Alex laughed, shuffling his feet against the dusty floor. “I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about that.”

It was Luke’s turn to furrow his brow, his red eyebrows pulling together like two rampaging fire caterpillars from Mario. “What do you mean?”

A pleased smile tugged at his mouth. A secret that felt not so secret the longer he got used to the idea that Penny and he were a couple. “Let’s just say, if there’s a scenario that doesn’t end with me marrying her, you have full permission to punch me in the face.”

The change in Luke’s expression was astounding. His jaw dropped in such a comical overexaggeration of surprise, it bordered on outrage. “Are you serious?”

He’d been asking himself the same question for the last ten days. He nodded. “I think I am.”

“Holy shit!” Luke sputtered.

He couldn’t have said it better himself.

“What can I say, she’s something special.”

Luke took a step forward, clapping a hand on his shoulder and squeezing. “You’re whipped, bro.”

If he were less of a man, he’d wince at the force. “I really, really am,” he responded in a faux moan. He acknowledged the bid for sympathy, but as Penny’s best friend, Luke didn’t give it. He just shook his head as he turned to unpack the rest of his bag. Alex watched him for a bit before he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “So, are we good now?”

Luke rolled his eyes, stuffing a bag of Lord-knew-what onto a shelf. “Yeah, man. We’re good.”

He bobbed his head, removing his hands from his pockets and stretching them out at either side. "You don't want to bro-hug it out?"

The question was satirical (but also legit), and just as he would have before Alex stuck his foot in his mouth, Luke shot him an amused look. "Why don't you ask your girlfriend to give you a ride home?"

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He exited the garage to grab another armful of stuff to find Penny still rifling through the back of the station wagon, trying and failing to look as though she didn't notice his reemergence. For as incredibly intelligent as she was, she really was terrible at acting nonchalant (not that he was any better), and he found that endearing as all hell. He sidled up next to her with every intention of grabbing something else and returning to the garage. She blinked up at him through her long, doe lashes as if she hadn't watched his every step. As though it was a surprise he was next to her. He was kind of disappointed she didn't press a hand to her chest in faux shock and whisper a breathless, "Oh, it's you!" like a vampish forties starlet reigning over Tinseltown.

He shook his head, reaching in to grab one of the numerous baskets still stacked in the trunk. "Yes, we made up Meddlesome Mary."

She reached out, patting the basket he was holding. "That goes in my car." She motioned over her shoulder to a small white hybrid parked in the neighboring driveway. The house she'd grown up in.

It was the picture of modern American romance. A tale as old as time. Two beautifully colonial homes, side by side, that contained the families of a respectful, wholesome girl and boy. Except it wasn't the typical everyday girl-next-door narrative, because he was there, and the girl next door was anything but the waspish *ingénue* waiting for her knight in



shining armor to save her. She saved herself, then saved the knight, and because she was every bit as wonderful as the fairytales suggested, she saved the knight's idiot best friend.

He bent down, angling his head toward her. Without hesitation, she pressed herself up onto her tiptoes and gave him a quick peck on the lips. "Speaking of your car, would you mind giving me a ride back to the city? Luke's going to spend the night with his dad, and if I don't get around pollution pretty soon, I'm going to break out into hives."

"Sure," she said simply, deftly continuing to separate things. It took two more trips to Frank's garage and three trips to Penny's car before they were settled. He wiped the back of his wrist across his brow as she closed the hatch.

He eyed Penny, then her parent's house, in quick succession. It was still quiet, dark, locked up tight in wait for the Fosters to return. He grinned, taking a swinging step toward her. "So," he drawled, pinning her with an expectant look. "Any chance I can get a tour. I have a hankering to see teenage Penny's childhood bedroom."

A knowing glint sparkled in her eye as she took a mirroring step forward. "That depends."

He angled his head. "On?"

She reached out, pinching his shirt between her thumb and forefinger, giving it a little tug. "How you feel about the color pink."

"Favorite color hands down," he answered automatically.

Her clever mouth tugged into a smirk, and he knew, without a doubt, whatever was going to come next was going to set him on his ear.

"How about cheerleading uniforms?"

He had no shame that he threw himself at her.

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Penny's bedroom turned out to be a wealth of contradictions. An innocent pink paradise that hosted the largest collection of books on murder, investigative journalism, and true crime he'd ever seen. He could safely say this woman was his soul mate, pastels aside. It served as both an insight into the madness of growing up a Foster, and the perfect setting for a deliciously depraved experience. Penny in anything drove him mad, but seeing her in her high school cheerleading outfit nearly melted his brain.

Thank god she was flexible. He not-so-subtly begged her to bring it with them.

*Spoiler alert: There was zero subtlety.*

Between the grand tour and the uniform debacle, it took them nearly two hours to get back on the road. Two hours very well spent.

Penny and Luke grew up in a little town three hours outside of the city. He supposed the picket fences and masked discrimination held the appeal to some, but Luke had told him a handful of the crazy stuff that happened when they'd been in high school, and Alex wasn't sure why anyone would want to live out here.

The drive really wasn't all that bad. He got to talk with Penny, tease her occasionally, and then turn around and pout because she was much better at teasing than he was. He kissed her a few more times over the course of the drive, pumped the gas and paid for the snacks when they stopped. It wasn't nearly as tedious as the ride up the mountain had been, but perhaps that was because, unlike before, he was now content to make the drive with their fingers laced together. He pressed a few kisses to her knuckles as he watched the scenery whip by outside. As one hour bled into another, the mountainous lines of trees began to give way to buildings. Every sign they passed announced they were getting closer and closer to home.

Something inside of him shifted when he saw the *New York: 25 miles* sign come and go. They were getting closer to

the city with every moment, and it made the realization of their upcoming reality all the more poignant. After ten days of basking in Penny's presence, they were due to part ways. They'd go back to their respective apartments (alone) and continue on with their lives.

He swallowed thickly. What if ... what if when she finally had a moment alone to think, she realized she'd made a tremendous mistake?

How long would it take her to realize they didn't fit into each other's life? Would it be when she had some positively important dinner to attend because she wrote another Pulitzer-Prize-worthy article? Was she really going to bring him to the banquets? All awkward six-foot-two-inches-walking-disaster that he was? When she wanted to do normal things like go to the movies or to dinner, but he was locked up in his apartment with his blinds drawn because he'd just had a breakthrough? Or if something happened to her on the way to work and she couldn't get ahold of him because he was asleep? How long until the little quirky things she found endearing were no longer cute? Despite what she said last night, about how neither of them was undeserving, it had to be a matter of time before reality set in.

He wanted to make her happy. At least as unbelievably, indescribably happy as she made him. She deserved it more than any person on the planet. He'd do anything to accomplish it, even if that meant letting her go. The infinite series of thoughts made his stomach convulse violently. He'd never find anyone else remotely like her. If they broke up, he'd spend the rest of his life trying and failing to get over her.

With every mile, his anxiety compounded upon itself. When Penny took the exit to his apartment, he was ready to rip off his seatbelt and throw himself out of the car. If she never saw him again, she couldn't break up with him, right? His hand started to sweat and his breathing started to get

shaky. He should probably let go of Penny's hand and wipe his slimy palm on his jeans, but he literally, physically, could not bring himself to let her go. He even tried, but his hand only tightened around hers.

They pulled up in front of his building too soon. He glared at his apartment as if it was the cause of every one of his problems. Invisible hands clasped themselves around his throat as she shifted the car into park and turned her jade eyes on him. She gave him her usual happy smile, looking past him to the building. "We made it. Back to the land of internet, coffee, and food delivery."

He swallowed against the swelling of his tongue, but the lump that had settled in his throat would not go away. Somehow, he was able to choke out, "I don't want it to be over."

She rolled her eyes, twisting in her seat to face him head-on. "You want to go back in the woods for more camping? Now I really have seen everything."

Her tone was light and teasing. It was meant to be a joke. It was meant to be sarcasm, the kind he thrived on and dished out like it was carbon monoxide. He should have been thrilled by her tone, at what it meant, but he wasn't. He managed a weak smile as he reached for her, curling his fingers lightly around the nape of her neck and bringing her lips to his. The kiss started out soft and sweet, but their gentle embrace only reminded him that there could be a finite number of moments like this one, and as quickly as it was sweet, it turned desperate. He pressed his lips harder to hers, deeper. She sunk into him, kissing him back with equal determination until she eased her hands over his and gently pulled them away. He chased her mouth with his own, determined that if he could simply keep kissing her, she wouldn't come to her senses.

"Alex," she chided as he moved to press his lips once more to hers. There were a few moments of blind bobbing

and weaving, chase and evasion. It went on until she caught his face with her hands, forcing him to look at her.

She seemed to understand the violent spiral his mind had taken during the drive. He assumed it was her brain-melting witchcraft that made her look at him with impossible fondness. Her voice softened to a tone he wanted to bundle himself up and live inside. "You know it's not over, right?"

He shouldn't be surprised she saw to the heart of him so quickly, and yet somehow, he still was. He didn't even recognize his own voice as he whispered, "Come upstairs, please."

"Alex, I'm parked in an 'unload only' zone. My car will be towed if we leave it here." He pulled his gaze away from hers, fixing his eyes on the clean, pristine vents in her center console. "I also need to unpack and get ready for work tomorrow."

The lump was getting larger, and his ability to be rational was getting smaller. He needed more time. He needed more time to process this. Time to be sure that what she was saying was real. Silence ticked on. He couldn't bring himself to get out of the car, to say anything more, or look at anything other than the vents. Not until her hands were back on his face and she was pulling him back to her. "Hey, look at me. I'll call you tonight, okay? I'll most likely text you before that about how much I hate laundry, which I'm warning you now, is a lot. Maybe I'll even let you take me to dinner tomorrow."

Her voice was coaxing and sweet. It was meant to reassure him, and although he felt himself nod, he didn't feel the assurance that action conveyed. She rubbed her thumb along his jaw and pressed a chaste kiss to his lips. "Later tonight. I promise"

"Okay." And with every iota of self-control he possessed, which was almost none, he forced himself to get out of the car, to grab his bag. Even though alarm bells were screaming inside of him, he watched as she drove away.

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Entering his apartment after being away for so long was like entering a completely different world. Whereas before the worn furniture and the mountain of books was a comforting embrace from the world outside (namely the swaths of people he neither knew nor cared to get to know), all he could feel now was overwhelming anxiety.

He wasn't the same person he had been a little over a week ago, when he'd locked his apartment door and trudged down the steps toward Luke's car. Now he knew exactly what life was like with Penny, and though it was startlingly too early for those kinds of thoughts, that's all he wanted to do. He wanted to talk to her, and laugh with her ... hell, he would have happily done her laundry for her. Why hadn't he asked? He should have offered.

He felt completely unlike himself—desperate in a way that was utterly and completely illogical. Those thoughts snowballed right back to the churning insecurity he felt over their newfound relationship.

It would go away, he was sure. Eventually, after Penny stuck around for a few weeks, it would go away. Like public speaking or sitting through a book signing. He'd practically been apoplectic the first time he was forced to do a formal event for his novel. Now he hated the publicity, but he could soldier through each of the required activities because he had to. He hated to liken Penny to a book signing (she was so much more) but, logically, he could deduce the same rules of engagement applied. He just needed to distract himself until she called. Once she called, he'd calm down. His brain and his body would understand she wasn't lying to him and this, they, were real. It just needed time. He hoped. He really, really hoped.

He needed a distraction and he needed it immediately. He dropped his bag with a shaking thud onto the floor next to his front door. He could follow in Penny's footsteps and do

some much-needed laundry, which sounded about as fun as going to the dentist. His eyes scanned over the sparsely placed items in his apartment. Opening up a book and getting lost in the complicated weave of sentences held no allure. Surprisingly, after so long without one, a TV-binge didn't either. His two "go-tos" had failed him, and left him with one other activity—writing.

He didn't feel like writing (inspiration, thou art a fickle mistress), but as a last-ditch effort not to go completely insane, he pulled out the blue notebook he'd been using during the trip. Transcribing the notes and passages both Penny and he had made into a document would be mindless short work, and getting it done and out of the way would be a massive accomplishment. He could walk into his meeting with Vivian next week confident it wouldn't end in his disappearance under highly suspicious circumstances.

He pressed the pages of the notebook flat as his laptop booted up. His eyes traced over Penny's neat handwriting, cramped, clean, and undoubtedly her. An inexplicable wave of emotion washed over him, and he reached out, letting his fingers trail over the letters. His stomach dipped as his computer welcomed him back. He shook his head before focusing in on the screen. *Distraction, Jones. You are supposed to be distracting yourself from thinking about Penny, not getting weepy simply because she exists.*

The second he opened the document, he threw himself into typing. Page after page, organized by carefully labeled header notes, her observations and his, all linked together so he could easily search and reference certain sections while he was writing the first draft. Once the notes were finished, he moved onto his chapter outline, then added the sections he'd already written where they were supposed to go. Slowly, a comprehensive outline of his book was forming. His fingers flew across the keys as he lamented Spencer's plight, completely ignoring the phone in front of him on the coffee table and the little clock in the corner of his laptop.

At one point, his throat got a bit scratchy and he got up to grab a bottle of water from his fridge. It quickly reminded him he should probably buy some sort of groceries, then he forced himself back down in front of his laptop and lost himself again. The trip had served its purpose. More so than just the things he'd written beforehand. He'd finished with the last page out of the notebook, then kept going, continuing onto the final scene like it was playing out in real-time. Words were pouring from his fingers in a way that they rarely did, and he wasn't one to tempt fate. If the great shaman of writing was willing to give him the clarity to continue to produce, he was going to write until he physically couldn't write anymore.

He didn't know how long he worked, or roughly how much he produced (something he typically liked to track). With his blackout curtains, he couldn't see what it looked like outside. He just knew he was exactly what he wanted to be: living in the moment, living for the keys and nothing else. He was the sentences he was writing, he was Spencer in the wild.

A knock sounded at the door.

His fingers froze as he pulled his attention from the screen of his computer to the substandard metal door that kept the rest of the world away.

He could only remember a handful of times in his life that someone actually knocked on his door, even fewer since he'd been living here. He was halfway sure he'd imagined it, a phantom knock brought on by the hysteria of his subconscious. Except another knock followed the first, and his frown deepened as he considered the development. He could feel the massive crease of his brow as he raked his hand through his hair.

"What in the hell ...?" he muttered as he pushed himself to his feet. He approached the door as though it was going to come clean off the hinges and physically attack him. Nobody came to his apartment except delivery guys or Luke,



and neither of those two was possible because he'd left Luke hours away and he hadn't ordered food yet.

It was probably just a neighbor, he firmly told himself. Probably someone wanting to give him terrible news like the elevator was going to be out of order for the next week and he was going to end up having to trudge up four flights of stairs every single day. He peeped through the eyehole only to find the beautifully alluring logo of the literal best pizza place in the universe.

What in the ... he hadn't ordered Paglianno's. Even though it did sound incredible now that he thought about it. The delivery guy probably saw the address and assumed by the sheer volume of Alex's orders it was him who had called it in. Either that or they hadn't heard from him in the last two weeks and were doing a welfare check, making sure their best customer wasn't dead. A wry smile settled on his lips, he stepped back, turning over his lock and easing the door open.

He stopped. The door half ajar, his brain a quarter functional, his stomach completely empty. What greeted him wasn't the usual delivery guy from Paglianno's commenting about how much Alex could pack away. What greeted him was the beautiful woman he was most definitely going to spend the rest of his life with (if she'd have him), freshly showered.

"So," she drawled coyly, her eyes dancing as she wiggled the box in her hands. "I was putting stuff away, and figured I'd order pizza because I'm definitely not going to have time to run to the store tonight, but I can't eat all this myself. Any idea where I could find a gorgeously neurotic author who's currently overanalyzing the relationship he's just entered, even though I told him not to?"

Emotion, thick, hot, and intense ignited inside him. His eyes felt wet, a pained smile pulled at his lips. He rested the side of his head against the doorframe as he looked at her in amazement. She knew, she knew he'd be slowly having an

anxiety-induced meltdown over what was going to happen next, and even though it was inconvenient and she really shouldn't have, she came anyway.

*She came anyway.*

He knew. Right then, right there, without a shadow of a doubt. He knew. That they were here, that this was real.

"I love you," he said simply, shaking his head a little in disbelief.

He loved her. Ten days and he was completely, fucking miraculously, never-going-back, out-of-his-mind in love with her. Her answering smile would most likely go down as the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. In fact, for the rest of his life, if he had to write those words in any situation, any scenario, they would pale in comparison to this.

"It took you long enough." She took a step forward, pressing herself onto her tiptoes and giving him a sweet kiss on the mouth. "I love you, too."



# EPILOGUE

He was fucking exhausted.

He'd been on the road promoting his new book for twenty-three days straight, and he wanted nothing more than to light his suitcase on fire, run the six miles to his girlfriend's house, and force her to snuggle him until either hunger or bodily functions forced them out of bed.

Hey, don't judge him too harshly. Penny Foster was a world-class snuggler, and he was more than man enough to admit holding her in his arms was his favorite activity. Well, favorite non-sexual activity, but he'd keep those details to himself.

He quickly minced his way out of the elevator, his suitcase dragging awkwardly behind him. If he hurried, he could just catch Penny when she got off work. Hopefully, she was wearing one of those pencil skirts that looked unfairly good on her, and she'd walk out of the door at the New York Times and into his arms. The orchestra would crescendo, birds would take flight, and the entire universe would focus in on the moment as they kissed.

Jesus, it had been a long twenty-three days, but it was nearly over. Just as long as he could get rid of his stuff and head back out the door. Alex fumbled his key in the lock and kicked the door open; it swung violently, slamming into the wall. He threw his suitcase inside, not caring where it landed. It smacked against the ground, sliding into the living room, coming to rest at the foot of a tent.

*A fucking tent.*

This is what his literal nightmares were made of. His brow furrowed and his mouth opened as he looked at it. He most certainly hadn't left an erect tent in his living room. Not now, not ever. He heard a quick shuffling from the inside of his mortal enemy, and out stepped the best thing that had

ever happened to him. Penny was standing in his living room with a frown on her face. "Oh, no! You're home early!"

It was settled, the woman was mad. Which was okay, she was also his, and he'd fight every single person who tried to have her committed. He stepped into the apartment, launching the door closed with another awkward swing of his leg, hopped over his suitcase, and pulled her into his arms.

She sunk into him, and he kissed her with twenty-three days of untold hysteria. It was perfect, and wonderful, and all the good things life had to offer. It was sunshine and daisies and puppies all in one.

It lasted for a long time but felt like seconds. When they finally eased away from each other, he held her close. Steeping himself in the heat of her, the taste of her. He tenderly framed her face with his fingertips as he took a heady inhalation of her scent. "Baby?" he queried quietly.

Her lashes fluttered, a little smile curled on her lips and he could have sworn he'd been slugged right in the stomach. "Yeah?"

"Why the fuck is there a tent in my living room?" The message may have been contextually flawed, but it was said with all the loving tenderness he felt from their reunion.

A wicked smile spread across her face. She stretched, reaching out her arms and wrapping them around his neck. He responded by wrapping his arms around her waist and hauling her against him. "It was supposed to be a surprise for our anniversary."

He raised a single brow. "The one that's next weekend?"

"Hmmmmmm ..." She wiggled against him and he felt his cock stir in his pants. Tempting little minx. "I figured you'd have something extraordinarily elaborate planned for us, and I wanted to surprise you, since you were coming home today."

He leaned forward, pressing his lips back to hers. "I think I need to have a conversation with Luke about keeping his

mouth shut.” Because, he did indeed have something elaborate planned for their anniversary. He’d practically killed himself keeping it a secret from her, and if she knew about it, there was only one person who could have told her. He gave her a few quick pecks before leaning back. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” she purred.

Yeah, he was going to need to get her clothes off—immediately. He plucked at the edge of her shirt. “You were supposed to be at work. I was going to come sweep you off your feet.”

She pulled her shirt up and over her head. *Praise Jesus.*

“I wanted to be here when you got home. I wanted to give you something good to come home to.”

She was the best thing he could come home to. The best gift she could ever give him. Still, he found himself stalking after her as she walked backward, leading him toward the opening of the tent in all of her topless glory. “And you landed on a tent for some reason?”

She unbuttoned her jeans and he ripped his flannel off, throwing it behind him. “I thought it would be fun to recreate how it all started. In the spirit of one whole year together.”

“The first of many,” he promised her. “Remind me to show you my dissertation regarding the downfall of the camping industry.”

“Noted.” She smiled as she hooked her thumbs into her pants and pushed them down over her hips. He ripped off his shirt. “I thought it would be fun to christen a tent without worrying about Luke walking in on us.”

He just managed to get out, “Baby, you’re a genius,” before he tackled her inside.

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He was gasping for air, staring at the ceiling of the tent as if he could see Jesus. He was still hazy from coming harder than he may have ever come in his life, and Penny was loose and languid draped over the top of him.

"Marry me," he gasped as he grasped for the ability to breathe.

She angled her head up to look at him and he immediately kissed her lips. "How many times have you asked me that? A few hundred?"

He brought his arms up to wrap around her, skimming over the length of her naked skin like he was petting velvet. "You keep thinking I'm joking."

"Well, the last time you asked I had just killed a spider for you, so I think the threshold to your proposals is shockingly low," she hummed as she burrowed into his arms.

To his credit, the spider was the size of his palm. Anyone would have screamed, Penny was just the exception. He gave a little laugh. "What do I have to do to get you to say yes?"

She angled her head back up at him. He got lost in the depths of her eyes the same way he always did when she looked at him. She quirked her lips into a pretty pout. "A ring would be a good indicator you're being serious."

*A ring was it? Well then ...*

He sent her flying with a whirl of limbs. She landed softly on her back, giggling as he covered her body with his. He pushed her tousled curls out of her face as his lips sought hers. "Get your clothes on, baby, we're going shopping."

# **Acknowledgements**



# About the Author



I started writing when I was nine years old. I was in love, it was poetry, and it was absolutely awful. I've always loved the written word, and at the age of thirteen I started posting short stories on various free platforms. Short stories grew to multi chapter novellas, which eventually turned to novels. Since then I've written hundreds of thousands of words, self-published five short stories, one novel, and am now working with Inkspell Publishing to publish two manuscripts coming early 2021.

I love meeting new people, so drop me a line anytime and say hi! You can find me at:

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